

DOWN & OUT: DOWN & UP

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

This week's Torah portion opens with the complex topic of the laws of purity and impurity that are associated with childbirth. The Torah tells us that "when a woman conceives and gives birth to a male child - she shall remain in a state of impurity for seven days. On the eighth day you shall circumcise the flesh of his foreskin".

These laws on their surface appear paradoxical. Why should the process of birth create a state of temporary "impurity?" Ritual impurity generally results from the cessation or absence of a life or a life force. It would therefore seem rather incongruous to attribute a state of tumah to the moment of birth, the very inception of life!

Also mystifying is the Torah's interjection with the mitzvah of bris milah after describing the seven-day period of impurity. The commandment of bris milah is mentioned in various other places in the Torah. Why repeat it here? Its insertion in the discussion of ritual impurity resulting from birth suggests an underlying theme that connects these two mitzvos. What might that be?

The Rambam teaches us that the creation of human life through reproduction is a most sublime and wondrous phenomena that offers man the opportunity, in a minute way, to replicate the Creator in the work of Creation. The human being's role in the process of reproduction is the closest we mortals can come to the Divine process of creation. But let us think for a moment about this process from another perspective, that of our neshama.

Our neshama and spiritual essence is imbued within us from the moment of conception. Our sages speak of a pure neshama being plucked from Hashem's Heavenly throne and forcefully invested in the physical and material shell of our human frame. Before its integration into the body it enjoys an almost idyllic state in our mother's womb. The yet unborn individual basks in an aura of spirituality without the distracting and corrosive influence of the outside world of "things."

During its decent to earth, it retains its purity, but once it is enmeshed within us, held hostage, so to speak, to our engagement in the material realm, its former pristine beauty and clarity are compromised.

The moment that the tiny bundle of life is thrust into our concrete physical world, the sweeping vista and spiritual clarity it enjoyed is all but forgotten. The body's finite senses take over and one is forced to think, breathe and operate through the medium of the physical senses. The neshama is now faced with the arduous and lifelong task of recovering its lost awareness and closeness to

Hashem.

Birth, then, does in a sense mark the absence of a life force and it therefore imparts impurity with its entry into the material world. As much as we celebrate the birth of a new-born, we are compelled to remember where the baby's spiritual moorings lie.

Alongside the natural joy of the event there is a recognition that a challenge has been issued to the baby and to its parents: Don't forget the spiritual potential and essence that lies within that tiny bundle of joy—a potential that was just obscured by the infant's entrance into a new world.

To counter this sobering thought, the Torah charts a pathway for the soul to be able to begin its long trek back to the heavenly throne and to the soul's spiritual source. "On the eighth day you shall circumcise his foreskin" by removing the superfluous skin covering the organ of continuity. We are thereby demonstrating our readiness to remove the barriers placed in the way of our spiritual ascent, and to strive to fulfill our life's task by bending our will to follow Him.

The act of milah enables us to hear the voice emanating from our neshama; the yearning to return home; the vibration of our soul amidst the confusion and chaos of a world that chases after physical pleasure. It is with this precious mitzvah that we embark on our life's mission of harnessing our physical drives and desires to Hashem's service.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos,

Rabbi Naftali Reich

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Rabbi Reich is on the faculty of the Ohr Somayach Tanenbaum Education Center.