

NEW MOTHER'S OFFERINGS: OF CHILDBIRTH & IMPURITY

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah:

A new mother is impure for seven days after bearing a baby boy and for a fortnight after bearing a baby girl. Following another thirty-three days (for a boy) or sixty-six days (for a girl) she was then to present herself in her purified state in the Temple with a sin-offering and thank-giving offering (Leviticus 12:6).

The new mother brought up a thank-giving offering for having survived her ordeal and a sin-offering to atone for a possible vow made by the woman not to bear any more children in the throes of labor and childbirth.

What is strange is that the creation of a new life-force - namely the baby to emerge from her womb - should be accompanied by a state of tumah, of spiritual contamination. Surely, tumah is a negative force, the opposite of purity and holiness; it has an affinity to death.

So why should the introduction of "life" in childbirth be paradoxically associated with spiritual defilement and the diametric power of death?

The power of creation, of childbirth, is simply awesome. It is man's attempt at expressing his divine gift and force of being a "creator", of being a "creation with the free choice to chart his destiny. Consequently, the life-force itself inherently carries with it a great "risk" and "health warning".

Just like in the creation of the universe, taking place within the person himself, is the relentless jostle between the forces of good and evil. This internal tug of war continues throughout the years and days of a person's life. And he is not spared until he finally breathes his last. This is why King Shlomo lauded the "ship returning to port" (i.e. the death of a saint) above "the ship setting sail" (birth of a child) whose future is uncertain.

There are two distinct possibilities. A bouncing and cuddling baby has great potential - he can grow up to actualize his potential and to become a righteous individual dedicated to serving his Creator. He can develop into a G-d-fearing person who is intent upon changing the world for the better, to become a medium of "goodness". And yet at the same time, the gift of free choice that accompanies life is hazardous. G-d forbid, this same innocent-looking child can grow up to become a malicious force of evil, of negativity and of wickedness.

The newborn will encounter evil and good. And he is forced to choose between them.

The Torah observes how "The inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21). The yetzer hara, Evil Inclination immediately appears on the scene upon the birth of a child. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 91b) records a discussion between Antoninus and Rabbi where the Roman emperor successfully argued that the yetzer hara's influence is not from the moment of the embryo's formation but rather from the moment of birth. A Scriptural support is the verse "Sin crouches at the door" (Genesis 4:7). By contrast, the yetzer tov, Good Inclination only makes its presence felt as the child approaches adolescence and intellectual maturity.

It is for this reason that childbirth itself - albeit the introduction of life - induces spiritual contamination. This is because it marks the materialization of the yetzer hara within a person and the creation of evil (the Hebrew word "yetzirah" means "creation"). Tumah, spiritual impurity is aligned with death and indicates distance from G-d, from the "Source of all life". Pursuing evil is a departure from G-d, and accordingly, the yetzer hara is the identical force as the "Angel of Death" (Bava Basra 16).

It remains to be seen whether the child will successfully make it his personalized mission to overcome his Evil Inclination within so that his free choice and life-force is dedicated to become a positive force of goodness, of holiness and of purity. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and **Torah.org**.