

THE PAIN AND PLEASURE OF BEING HUMAN

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Parashas Tazria:

G-d told Moshe, "Tell the children of Israel that when a woman conceives and gives birth to a male she will be considered spiritually unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during the time of separation when she has her periodic discharge. On the eighth day his flesh should be circumcized." (VaYikrah 12:1)

Spiritual impurity itself is an enigma. There is nothing in the physical world to which it can really be compared, since its properties are unlike any physical ailment. It is, perhaps, even stranger that childbirth itself, a time of life and (hopefully) great joy, should be the cause of such a spiritual malady.

On the other hand, the Torah writes:

To the woman He [G-d] said, "[Because you ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil] I will greatly increase your anguish and your pregnancy. It will be with anguish that you will give birth to children ..." (Bereishis 3:16)

To which the Talmud adds:

Rebi Shimon ben Yochai's students asked him, "Why does the Torah command a woman who gave birth to bring a sacrifice?" He answered them, "Because, at the time she is about to give birth, she vowed [because of the pain] to never be available to her husband again [to avoid having more children] ... "Why is circumcision on the eighth day (and not earlier)?" "In order that while everyone is happy, the mother and the father should not be depressed." (Niddah 31b)

And that pain lasts only hours, or days (when everything goes well for mother and child)! After that comes the "pain" of raising the children, which can last decades!

And even should the children turn out "all right" (which had not been the case with Menashe, the son of the righteous king Chizkiah, as he had foreseen ...

"In those days, Chizkiah became deathly ill, and Yishaya ben Amotz, the prophet, came to him, and

told him, 'So says G-d! Command your house, for you will die ...' " (Yishaya 38:1) ... Chizkiah asked, "Why is my punishment so severe?" "Because," he answered him, "you have not married." "That's because," Chizkiah told him, "I foresaw through the Divine spirit that evil children will come from me!" "What business have you with the secrets of G-d?!" Yishaya berated. "Whatever you are commanded to do, you must fulfill, and whatever pleases The Holy One, Blessed is He, let Him do!" (Brochos 10a))

... there is still the constant worrying about the childrens' well-being the rest of the parents' lives. In fact, childbirth itself is considered so dangerous that, according to the Meshech Chochmah (Bereishis 9:1), woman themselves are not commanded in the mitzvah (the Torah does not command someone to risk his or her life as a matter of course). Even Shabbos is broken for a woman giving birth, who has the status of a person with a life-threatening illness!

"So why have children?" many ask today.

Because, as Yishaya the prophet told King Chizkiah, we must fulfill the mitzvah to "be fruitful and multiply" (Bereishis 1:28) and to "populate the world" since, as the Talmud writes:

The point of creation is to have children. (Pesachim 88b)

And as the Sefer HaChinuch comments, "... The world should be inhabited, as it is written, 'He did not create it in chaos; He formed it to be inhabited.' (Yishaya 45:18)."

Not only this, but, the Talmud has this to say about the period of childbirth itself:

A candle is lit on his head and he is able to see from one end of the world until the other end There isn't a better period for a person than these days [in the womb] ... They [the angels] teach him all of Torah ... and as he enters the world, an angel hits him on his mouth and he forgets it [to be recalled later throughout the course of his life through learning]. (Niddah 30b)

Hence, in a world that has produced children that have grown up to shun the idea of having their own children, or people who willingly produce illegitimate children, or parents who give birth to legitimate children but who fail to provide the necessary love to allow their offspring to grow up to become responsible and content adults, the Torah reminds us how serious a priority childbearing/childrearing actually is.

Hence, in the end, children are more than an "atonement" for the parents who bear them, or for mankind as a whole; they are the very symbol of a meaningful life! As my Rosh Yeshiva used to remind us, "If you ask any parent what their greatest pleasure in life is, they'll tell you, 'My children!' But if you also ask them, 'And what is your greatest pain?' they'll also answer, 'My children!' From here we learn, Rabbi Noach Weinberg would say, that the greatest pleasures in life often come through great pain as well!

Including Moshiach. In fact, the process that brings Moshiach and the final redemption is one that is compared to that of giving birth.

Perhaps losing sight of this is what really results in the greatest spiritual impurity possible (which symbolizes a spiritual detachment from G-d), and why pain in childbirth and childrearing was G-d's response to Chava's sin. We are a generation that avoids pain and suffering like the plague itself, always looking for an "easy way out" ... of "having our cake and eating it to." In the words of one professional from the "old days":

"Gone is the time when a worker worked hard to do the job right, just for the pleasure of knowing the job was done right, professionally, even though it didn't make him one nickel more."

Perhaps this is also why this week's parsha speaks of this mitzvah and the mitzvah of Bris Milah (something else this generation is turning its back on because of the "pain" inflicted on the newborn) in the same breath. Together, these two concepts teach that pain is a necessary part of life if you're truly going to be fruitful, and be able to appreciate what you've accomplished.

In the merit of this week's parsha sheet (and others like it), may those yet to be blessed with the pleasure of fulfilling the Torah's mandate bear children of their own, and may we all be blessed to forever appreciate the opportunity of being children, and of having them. Oh, and, may our children be blessed to give their parents real yiddishe nachos. Amen!

Shabbos Day:

All the days that he is afflicted he is defiled; he is unclean, and shall abide alone ... (VaYikrah 13:46)

On the heels of the section dealing with the laws of childbirth is the parsha of the metzora, the person afflicted with tzara'as. Tzara'as was a form of leprosy that inflicted a person for spiritual, not physical reasons, specifically for speaking loshon hara, derogatory (but true) speech about someone else.

The Talmud writes (and Rashi quotes; 13:46):

Our rabbis asked, "Why is he (the metzora) treated differently from other unclean persons, that he must abide solitary? They answered, "Because he, by speaking loshon hara, caused a separation between man and wife, or between a man and his friend; therefore he must be separated from everyone else. (Arachin 16b)

In fact, the same tractate of the Talmud spends over one folio page discussing the severity of the sin, making the following shocking statements:

Anyone who speaks loshon hara is like one who denies all of Torah ... like one whose sins are increased until heaven ... like one who is fitting to be stoned ... like one of whom G-d says that He can't live in the same world ... like one whose sins are increased corresponding to the three sins: idol

worship, illicit relations, and murder (for which one must die rather than commit!) ... (Arachin 15b)

And so on. In fact, loshon hara is called the "profession" of the "Original Snake," the one that tempted Chava to eat from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil back in the Garden of Even, after he spoke loshon hara about G-d Himself! (Try telling that to the newspapers!)

What makes speaking loshon hara so difficult to avoid is that it can be committed without saying anything at all. In fact, Eyov (Job), who had been one of Paroah's advisors when the latter had sought a "Final Solution" to the Jewish problem in Egypt, said nothing at all when asked his opinion, neither defending the Jewish people nor condemning them. The result? Eyov was later inflicted with tzara'as, which was alluded to in the "Song of the Sea" recited by the Jewish people after the Egyptians had been drowned:

Your right hand, G-d, is adorned with strength; Your right hand, G-d, smashed the enemy (tiratz oiyev) ... (Shemos 15:6)

According to the Arizal, the words "tiratz oiyev" (tav, raish, ayin, tzaddik ... aleph, vav, yud, bais) can also spell the words: tzara'as Eyov (tzaddik, raish, ayin, tav ... aleph, yud, vav, bais), the leprosy of Eyov! when the letters are re-arranged. (The reason for this allusion here will be explained, b"H, next Parashas BeShallach.)

What makes loshon hara so evil is that it surpasses man's obligation to be like G-d, because it is symptomatic of man's desire to play G-d.

After all, when one speaks loshon hara, what is he doing? He is judging the person. Fine... the Torah tells us that we must judge people by virtue of the fact that we have a mitzvah to punish offenders of society through an authorized Torah-based court system, and to criticize those who stray from Torah (Shabbos 54b). However, is that called judging the person, or their actions?

Judging a person's actions means saying:

Hey, what you have done seems contrary to Torah. Do you have a good reason for it? If not, was it accidental? If you did it purposely, do you know that you are punishable by such-and-such a punishment?

However, can we call this person evil? An evil person is someone who could have been good, and chose to be evil instead. But most of the people in the world who do "evil" things do so because somewhere, at sometime(s), something went wrong in that person's life. Were you there at his birth? Did you grow up with this person? Do you know the person's family situation? In short, do you know every detail of the person's life that you can evaluate his soul and say yes, this person is in fact evil?

Is this not something only G-d can do?

Perhaps this is why the metzora stays alone. G-d is One, and alone. No being can accompany G-d, nor does G-d need the company of another. However, to be human is to be dependent upon other

people (Brochos 5b), and there is no better way to be reminded of this than to be put into solitary confinement. In solitude, one learns quickly how much they are not G-d. When one goes through the humiliation of having to visit the kohen for an examination of a growth on his body, clothing, or house, he can't help but feel very human, in fact, too human.

But what about today? Without the Temple, tzara'as is a defunct punishment (mold due to moisture does not count as tzara'as, though it has an uncanny way of growing when loshon hara was spoken!). Not so quick. As the Talmud says elsewhere, though not all the punishments of the Torah are in effect today, G-d still has a way of getting His message across to us about the things we do well, and the things we do wrong. Man has tremendous and noble ability to become G-d-like. Let us never forget that it is when we try to be G-d Himself that we are made painfully aware of just how human we really are.

Seudos Shlishi:

Parashas Metzora:

Continuing on with the theme of spiritual impurity, Parashas Metzora discusses the laws of purification once the period of tzara'as has ended. The parsha ends off with a similar discussion to do with male and female discharges, and the spiritual defilement they cause.

The Talmud states that there are four people who are considered like dead people while alive, one of which is the metzora. The reason for this is alluded to in the Torah when it states:

Choose life! That you and your descendants may live ... (Devarim 30:19)

The Torah is not talking to people who are constantly on the verge of committing physical suicide (G-d forbid); the Torah is talking to all of us who might be on the verge of committing spiritual suicide (also G-d forbid), by wasting our lives away pursuing less-than-meaningful goals. Since the ultimate goal of life is to be like G-d, the four categories of people referred to in the Talmud are people whose ability to be like G-d and to relate to Him has been lessened through their predicament. The lessening of one's ability to relate to G-d is tantamount to dying, at least spiritually.

Hence, ultimately, death and spiritual defilement (which came into the world as a result of the death that Adam and Chava caused through their sin), is that which interferes with one's potential to relate to G-d, which can be the result of the person, his environment, or both. When Adam and Chava ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, they violated their relationship with G-d, creating a distance between themselves and their source of life. Therefore, death was not a punishment; it was a consequence of their action (just as is the "dying" of a radio that has become unplugged). Their ability to sense G-d and relate to them was impaired.

Perhaps this is why the waters of the mikvah of spiritual purification cannot be "drawn" water, for drawn water is water that which has become "disconnected" from its source. If the goal is to become reconnected to the Source of life, that is, G-d (physically, spiritually, and symbolically), water detached from its source cannot be of much help.

We can understand the laws pertaining to emissions from the body of a male or female in a similar way. In each case, it is such fluids that are generally used by the body in the production of life, and the loss of these fluids represents the loss of potential life ... a form of physical death, and therefore, a form of spiritual death as well.

We are most like G-d when we are creating life, not taking it away or even just wasting it. To do just the opposite is not just the loss of an opportunity to imitate G-d ... it is a defilement of our very being! It is such sensitivity to the human capacity to give life, and to sustain life that allows one to live in the image of G-d. And as we see in many places, it is this sensitivity that is the true source of the Jewish concept of holiness as well.

Melave Malkah:

Sefiros HaOmer: Part One

On the second night of Pesach, we began counting the Omer in the evening after three medium-sized stars appeared. We will continue to count the omer until Shavuot fifty days later (we don't count the fiftieth day itself). We count the omer, because the Torah commands us:

"You are to count from the next day of the rest day, from the day you brought the Omer-Offering that is waved; they are to be seven complete weeks ... (VaYikrah 23:15)

Normally, this period between Pesach and Shavuot, during which the omer is counted, is often viewed mainly in terms of its halachic status as a period of *aveilus*-mourning. For thirty-three days of this period, we are told, twenty-four thousand students of Rebi Akiva died, because they didn't sufficiently honor one another. After all, it was their mentor who emphasized that a "main principle of Torah is, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "

For this reason, we reduce our joy somewhat during this period for at least 33 days until Lag B'Omer (there are different traditions concerning the starting and ending point of this period), including not taking haircuts, not listening to music, and not getting married. All of this is to remind us about what went wrong during this period, so that we can help to rectify now what went wrong then.

However, Sefiros HaOmer is significant more because these forty-nine days bind Pesach to Shavuot, and are a build-up to Kabbalos HaTorah-the receiving of Torah-on Shavuot. In a sense, Pesach and Shavuot are like the first and last days of the holiday, and the period of the omer is like the "Chol

HaMoed" period in-between them, making the entire 51 day period like one long holiday.

Therefore, the counting of the omer helps us to complete the process on Shavuos which began Seder Night. How is that? Because, just like the "Poor Man's Bread" symbolized the ultimate refinement and simplification of the person in preparation for freedom from the shackles of physicality; so too did the omer, which was barley (animal food) symbolize the elevation of the animal side of man to that of the soul. That is why on Shavuos, we ceased bringing barley and instead brought bread, to symbolize the elevation of the human spirit.

Over the upcoming weeks, b"H, we will discuss these concepts in more detail, especially the connection of the omer to the very esoteric and Kabbalistic concept of the sefiros themselves.

Shabbat Shalom.

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