

# DEGREES OF SEPARATION DEGREES OF EQUALITY

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

Parsha Tazria opens with a focus on childbirth and parenting. If the baby is a boy, the mother is Tameh (restricted status) for 7 days and Tahor (unrestricted status) for 33. On the eighth day the father must arrange for a Bris (circumcision). If the baby is a girl, the mother is Tameh for 14 days and Tahor for 66 days. The obvious question is, why is the father more so that the mother obligated to arrange the Bris and why does the mother double her times of Tumah and Taharah if her baby is a girl?

Rav Hirsch explains that the Torah is addressing the role of the father and mother in raising their children. Common sense and experience dictate that parents are the role models for their children. Beyond the love and care that parents lavish upon their children, regardless of gender, is the unique role modeling of an adult male toward a son and an adult female toward a daughter.

The Bris is the obligation of the father because it inculcates the baby boy into his national identity and responsibilities as a Jewish male. However, let's be honest. It is an identity that is imposed on the baby boy and an experience he will not remember. In and of itself it has little meaning or impact on the baby. Therefore, the Mitzvah must be more than its ceremonial value and celebration - it must be more for the father than the son. The Bris obligation imposed on the father is to focus the father on his obligation as a role model and teacher. It means that a son will usually do what his father does. If the father wears Tzitzis (fringes), puts on Tefilin (phylacteries), learns Torah, treats his wife with respect and dignity, his son will do the same. The immediate commandment for the father is to circumcise his son. The life long message is the obligation to model for his son how to be to be an observant Jewish man. Is there a comparative ceremony and message for a mother to her daughter?

Rav Hirsch explains that the equation of 7 non-clean days and 33 clean days is the process necessary for a woman to deal with her profoundly personal involvement in the birthing of life. With the birth of a girl, the second series of 7 days and 33 days totaling 14 non-clean days and 66 clean days is to focus the mother on her obligation as the role model for her daughter. If she lights candles, attempts to understand and appreciate Jewish law, goes to the Mikveh (ritual bath), and treats her husband with dignity and respect, her daughter will do the same. The daughter does not know or remember that the mother waited the extra week and 33 days at the time of her birth; however, the mother knows what she did, and she knows that she did so for the sake of her newborn daughter.

This past week, I was challenged to defend Rav Hirsch's explanation of the doubled days of Tumah

and Taharah with the birth of a girl. The stated concern was for the apparent lack of equability between the two declarations of assumed responsibility. On the one hand, the Bris - the father's assumption of obligation to raise his son as an observant Jewish man; and on the other, the mother's doubling the days of Tumah and Taharah that emphasize her obligation to raise her daughter as a observant Jewish woman. On the one hand the Bris with its ceremonious and devotional public trappings; and on the other hand, the private contemplation of the mother as she doubles the time of her Tumah and Taharah.

Initially, I directed my response to the presumption that mandated public displays of commitment and devotion are somehow more important than private moments of contemplation and focus. As such, the Bris is certainly a much stronger expression of assumed obligation on the part of the father than the doubled time of Tumah and Taharah would be for the mother. However, I believe that reasoning to be emotionally fueled and intellectually flawed. Public displays and ceremonies certainly seem to be more important; however, true commitment and devotion is far better proven in the private arena than the public. How often do we present our better selves in the limited and relatively occasional arena of the public while reserving our impatience and insensitivities for the privacy of our homes and loved ones? How often does a person display generosity and benevolence while in the public eye and self-centered judiciousness when removed from public scrutiny? No, I do not accept that public displays and ceremonies necessarily add value to the individual Mitzvos.

Furthermore, the ceremonies or lack there of are not for the sake of the child. Neither boy-child nor girl-child understands or remembers the moment. The statements of purpose that both mother and father declare, each in their own prescribed way, is for themselves not their newly born babies. As such, each declaration reflects the nature of the devotion and commitment that the parent undertakes, and the nature of male mitzvos is different than female mitzvos. The nature of male Mitzvos is to emphasize devotion and commitment in the public arena. The nature of female Mitzvos is to emphasize the modesty of the person within the private context of hearth and home. Neither male nor female commandments are intended to the exclusion of the other; rather, they highlight different dimensions of our relationship with G-d.

Let's talk marriage. The Ashkenazik custom is for the bride to circle the groom seven times prior to the actual Kedushin - marriage. Some have suggested that this reflects the chauvinistic bend of the rabbis against females. It presumes that the circling female is to be dominated by her husband and bound to him and him alone. In part, there is truth to the notion of being bound, devoted, and committed to one's husband and only one's husband; however, that is equally true for the husband. He too is bound to his wife by Halacha (Jewish law). In fact, his monogamous devotion is more the product of rabbinic law than it is biblical mandate and underscores the profound honesty of the rabbis when it came to male vulnerability and weakness rather than their deprecation of the female role in marriage and society. The circling is done to show the very opposite. The bride does not

circle her groom outside of the Chupah (marriage canopy). The circling is done within the confines of the symbolic marriage home. It says to the groom that he must tame his nature and accept the role of his bride in defining the context of their home and the value of its content - and he must do so before he offers her his ring! If he can accept her dominant role in defining their home - Mazal Tov! If he cannot accept her encompassing role and his central place within that home let him say so before the marriage ceremony! And where does the young couple make this statement? It is all done in public! The acceptance of this division of labor and role is proclaimed and celebrated before the prying eyes of extended family and friends.

The definition of human equality must be divinely mandated rather than intellectually or emotionally formulated; otherwise, it will be subject to the ever-changing whims of person and society. In last week's Parsha the extraordinary persons of Nadav and Avihu died because they did not accept the absolutes of G-d's commandments. They assumed positions that they had no right to assume. Regardless of their intentions and talents they lost sight of who they were and what their purpose was. Their purpose was to serve G-d by administering to the nation as Kohanim (priests). Their purpose was to show all those seeking closeness with G-d that regardless of personal talents and greatness closeness is equally available to all who are willing to subject themselves to His will. They were in fact the best equipped to teach this lesson because they were personally so great and talented. Regardless of their personal greatness, their relationship with G-d was still defined by simple adherence to the will of G-d. No more or less than anyone else in the nation, if they did their mandated job they were true servants of G-d and could claim closeness to the Divine. If they did not do as G-d mandated, they were wrong and distant from G-d.

The same is true with marriage and family. It is the job of family that defines equality. That job is to build a home filled with adherence to the will of G-d. Whoever participates and does their part in creating and maintaining that environment is equal to anyone else who does the same. It has nothing with doing the same thing as anyone else. It only has to do with doing the job. For some the arena will be public and for others private; however, the focus and commitment to the shared ideal must be the same. Some will make public statements of devotion while others will strengthen their commitments in the privacy of home and heart. Some will circle seven times while others will be circled. Regardless, the Torah, not us, defines equality.

1st, 2nd, & 3rd Aliyot: The laws of purity and impurity as they pertain to childbirth are discussed. The basic laws of Tzaras, its diagnosis by a Kohain, the possibility of a quarantine, and the laws of Tzaras as it relates to healthy and infected skin are discussed.

4th, 5th, 6th, & 7th Aliyot: The laws of Tzaras as it relates to a burn, a bald patch, dull white spots, and the presence of a Tzaras blemish on clothing is detailed.

### **Maftir HaChodesh**

This week, in addition to the regular Parsha, we read the section known as HaChodesh. The

additional sections of Shekalim, Zachor, Parah, and Chodesh are read prior to Pesach for both commemorative and practical reasons. This additional section from Shemos [Exodus], Parshas Bo, Chapter 12, is read on the Shabbos before the month of Nissan, or on the Shabbos of Rosh Chodesh Nissan. This section is an account of the very first Mitzvah given to the Jewish people as a nation. It includes the concept of Rosh Chodesh - the New Moon, as well as the basic laws of Pesach and the Pascal Lamb. Being that Pesach starts on the 15th of Nissan, this section is read about two weeks before Pesach begins. As with Parshas Parah, Chazal [sages] wanted the reading of this Parsha to be a reminder that Pesach is almost upon us! Only two more weeks to make the necessary arrangements to get to Yerushalayim and bring the Pascal Lamb! Only two more weeks and your house had better be in order! (are you panicked yet?) It is interesting that Hashem selected the Mitzvah of the New Moon as the first national Mitzvah. Basically, the Mitzvah required two eye witnesses to testify before Beis Din that they had seen the tiny sliver of the new moon's crescent that is the very first exposure of the moon's new monthly cycle. The Beis Din would then declare the start of the new month. The most obvious consequence of this procedure was the 29 or 30 day month, otherwise identified by a one or two day Rosh Chodesh. A two day Rosh Chodesh is comprised of the 30th day of the previous month and the 1st day of the new month. A one day Rosh Chodesh means that the preceding month was only 29 days long making Rosh Chodesh the 1st day of the new month. This would have an immediate effect on the scheduling of Yomim Tovim and other calendar ordained activities. It underscores from the very inception of the nation that the Beis Din, representing the Rabbinic leadership of the nation, were the single most important factor in guaranteeing the practice of Torah throughout time. It was as if G-d would wait for Beis Din to notify Him when His Yomim Tovim were to be.

### **Haftorah HaChodesh: Ezekiel 45:1**

This week's Haftorah is from Yechezkel - Ezekiel Chapter 45 and is related to the reading of Parshas Hachodesh. The latter chapters of Yechezkel describe the future Bais Hamikdash and the service that will take place once Mashiach has come and the Jews have returned to Eretz Israel. The Haftorah describes the offering that the Prince (the King or the High Priest) will bring on Rosh Chodesh - the New Moon. This selection from Yechezkel is especially appropriate for the Shabbos that precedes or coincides with the beginning of the month of Nissan. The month of Nissan is known as the month of redemption. Our exodus from Egypt took place in the month of Nissan. The Mishkan was first assembled on Rosh Chodesh Nissan. The Mizbeach was inaugurated into service during the first 12 days of Nissan. Therefore, we hope that this year, in the month of Nissan, we will again merit to be redeemed from exile, rebuild the Bais Hamikdash, and again inaugurate the Mizbeach by bringing the Rosh Chodesh offering in the service of G-d.

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