

A Sin Offering for Giving Birth?

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The beginning of our parshah, apart from teaching us about brit milah, focusses on the tumah (ritual impurity) caused for a woman who gives birth, and the sacrifice brought in order to remove it. The sacrifice is titled chatat, which is usually rendered as “sin offering”, because its ritual is normally carried out by a person who has sinned.

The Talmud (Keritot 26a) states explicitly that the woman who gives birth has not sinned, and her offering is not a true “sin offering” – but then why does she become impure, and why does the Torah require this offering at all, for what seems to be the epitome of a good deed, bringing a new life into this world?

Many different approaches to this problem was offered by our sages through the generations; see, for example, the Gemara in Nidah 31b in which Rabbi Shimon suggests the new mother's withdrawal for the sake of her newborn requires atonement, or the Kli Yakar on our Parsha who connects this sin offering to the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge which brought the painful birth process as we know it.

Maybe another explanation can be added. It is not only the woman who gives birth who is required to bring an unusual sin offering; the same requirement is due from G-d, as it were, for “giving birth” to the world. In a well-known midrash (Talmud, Shevuot 9a), we learn that G-d is obligated to bring a sin offering for making the Moon smaller than the Sun. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, in a published letter (Igrot haRaayah 1:108), hinted at the following explanation for the Divine sin offering: the Sun represents the ideal that instigated Creation, and the Moon represents the practical realization of that ideal. The “sin” attributed to G-d, thus, is Creation itself, which fails to fully represent the pure ideal behind it. For this, a sin offering is being brought every Rosh Chodesh. Giving birth is similar, in many ways, to creation of a world (Talmud, Sanhedrin 37a), and so a similar explanation may be offered here. Giving birth is the ultimate act of kindness and a profound mitzvah (see Tosafot Gittin 41b shene'emar), but it is also an act of bringing potential into reality and losing some of the potential light along the way. In our practical world, the mother will not be able to be the perfect mother she dreams of being, and the child will not be able to realize every skill and ability given to him by G-d. The mother, then, experiences a period of impurity and brings this “sin offering” in recognition of these inherent failures, and with a prayer for the day in which, “The light of the moon shall be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold as the light of the seven days, on the day when G-d shall bind the fracture of His people, and their wound He shall heal.” (Yeshayahu 30:26)

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