



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

תזריע תשע"ט
Tazria 5779

The Sacrifices of Childbirth

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks* for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT TAZRIA IN A NUTSHELL

Parshat Tazria continues the laws of purity and impurity begun in Parshat Shemini. One of the key roles of the Priest was to distinguish *tahor* from *tamei*, pure from impure. Impurity meant an individual was forbidden from entering the sacred space of the Sanctuary.

These categories show us the contrast between God and human beings. God is immortal, humans are mortal. God is spiritual, humans are also physical, and whatever is physical can become diseased or decayed. The things that make a person *tamei* are connected to our mortality and physicality. People who have been reminded in this way of their own

mortality may not enter holy space until they are healed and purified.

The parsha begins with the laws relating to childbirth – the impurity it brings, and also the command to circumcise a male child on the eighth day. It continues with laws relating to *tzara'at*, often translated as leprosy, but which refers to something larger than a disease, because it affects not only people but also clothes and houses. It was the task of the Priest to examine the symptoms, and to declare the person clean or unclean, or to be separated until a clearer diagnosis could be made. The Sages see *tzara'at* as a punishment for the sin of evil speech.



THE CORE IDEA

At the start of this parsha is a cluster of laws that challenged and puzzled the commentators. A woman who has just given birth is unclean for seven or fourteen days (depending on the gender of the baby), and then she must wait for a further period of thirty-three or sixty-six days before coming into contact with holy objects or appearing at the Temple. She then has to bring two sacrifices, a sheep for a burnt offering and a dove for a sin offering.

The question is, why does she need to bring these sacrifices? We could understand if she had to bring a thanksgiving offering, to give thanks for the safe delivery of the baby, but that is not what she is commanded. Instead she must bring a burnt offering – normally brought for a serious wrongdoing – together with a sin offering. What, though, is her wrongdoing? What is her sin?

There is a fascinating story in the Talmud that can help us answer the question of the sin offering:

"When the Holy One, Blessed Be He, came to create man, He created a group of angels first and asked them, "Should we make man in Our image?"

They replied, "Master of the Universe, what will be his actions?" So God showed them the history of mankind. The angels replied, "Why would You be interested in creating such a creature?" [We say no!].

So God destroyed the angels. He created a second group, and asked them the same question, and they gave the same answer.

And God destroyed them also. He created a third group of angels, and they replied, "Master of the universe, the first and second group of angels told You not to create man, and look what happened to them! You did not listen. All we can say is this: the universe is Yours. Do whatever You wish!"

So God created man.

But when it came to the generation of the Flood, and then to the generation of those who built the Tower of Babel, the angels said to God, "See! The first angels were right! Look at how evil man is!" God replied to them "Even to old age I will not change, and even to grey hair, I will still be patient." [Isaiah 46:4]

The angels were against the creation of humankind because they knew what humans were capable of - sinning and destroying the work of God. The story implies that God knew that humans would sin and yet still created us. This could explain the sin offering brought when a child is born. The child will one day sin. All people do. So a mother brings a sin offering in advance, for any sin the child may commit while still a child, as if to say: "God, You knew humans

would sin, and You still created them and commanded us to bring new lives into the world. Therefore, please accept this sin offering in advance for any wrong my child may do."

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think God ignored the reply of the first two groups of angels in the story from the Talmud? Why did He ask them in the first place if He wasn't going to listen to them?
2. Do all people sin? Why do you think this is?
3. Do you think parents are responsible for the future sins of their children?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Early on in his medical career, the Polish-Jewish doctor Janusz Korczak became concerned with caring for underprivileged children. He wrote books about what happens when they are not cared for and in 1911 he founded an orphanage for Jewish children in Warsaw. It became so successful that he was asked to create one for Catholic children as well, which he did.

He had his own radio programme which made him famous throughout Poland. He was known as the "old doctor" across the country. But he had revolutionary views about the young. He believed in trusting them and giving them responsibility. He got them to produce their own newspaper, the first children's paper in Poland. He turned schools into self-governing communities. He wrote some of the great works of child psychology, including one called *The Child's Right to Respect*. He believed that in every child's soul there burns a moral flame that can be nurtured to

brighten and defeat the darkness that can also be found in human nature.

In 1940 he and his orphans were driven into the Warsaw ghetto. In 1942 the order came to transport all the children to Treblinka. Because he was a famous doctor, Korczak was offered the chance to escape, but he refused to abandon the children. In one of the most powerful moments of the Holocaust years, he walked with his 200 orphans through the streets of Warsaw to the train that took them to the gates of death, inseparable from them to the end.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why were the ideas of Janusz Korczak so revolutionary in that generation?
2. Can you find the message of both *The Core Idea* and *Thinking More Deeply* in this story?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Two questions remain about the laws following childbirth found in the parsha. Why is the mother of a newborn considered 'tamei', and why must she bring a burnt offering (in addition to the sin offering we have already discussed)?

The words *tamei* and *tahor*, normally translated as (ritually) "unclean/clean," or "defiled/pure" refer to a spiritual status relating purely to whether one is in a condition that prevents him/her from entering the Tabernacle or Temple. The Tabernacle, and at a later date, the Temple, were symbols of the presence of God within the human domain. But they were only symbols, because in monotheism God is everywhere equally. The very

concepts of place and time in relation to God are metaphorical. It is not that God is here rather than elsewhere but that we, as humans, feel His presence here rather than elsewhere.

God is eternal. God is spiritual. We and the universe are physical and whatever is physical is subject to birth, growth, decline, decay, and death. It is these things that must be excluded from the Sanctuary if we are to have the experience of standing in the presence of eternity.

Therefore anything that reminds us or others of our mortality prevents us from entering the holy: the fact that we are born and will one day die. Contact with death or

even birth has this effect. Both therefore exclude the person who has had such contact from the domain of the holy. These include those who had come into contact with the dead (Numbers 19:1–22) and a mother who had given birth.

As for the burnt offering, this is a reminder of the binding of Isaac, and of the animal sacrificed as a burnt offering in Isaac's place (Genesis 22:13). The binding of Isaac was intended as a protest against the absolute power parents had over children in the ancient world – *patria potestas*, as it was called in Roman law. Essentially, the child was regarded as the property of his/her parents. A father had total legal power over a child, even to the extent of life and death. That was one reason why child sacrifice was so widely practised in the ancient world.

The Torah makes an implicit comment on this in its account of the name given to the first human child. Eve called him Cain – from the Hebrew meaning “ownership” – saying, “I have acquired a child through God” (Gen. 4:1). Treat your child as a possession and you may turn him into a murderer: that is what the text implies.

The narrative of the binding of Isaac is a statement for all time that parents do not own their children. The whole story of the birth of Isaac points in that direction. He was born when Sarah's childbearing years were already over and she was incapable of having a child naturally (Genesis 18:11). Isaac was clearly the special gift of God. As the first Jewish child, he became the precedent for all subsequent generations. The binding was intended to establish that children belong to God. Parents are merely their guardians.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

The story of the binding of Isaac is opaque to us because we take it for granted that children have their own legal identity and rights. But this is a very modern proposition indeed. In Roman law, the principle of *patria potestas* meant that children were the property of their fathers, who had the legal right to do with them what they chose, including kill them. In the Victorian era, social activists had to work hard to lessen the brutalities of child labour such as children being sent down mines or working long hours in factories.

Only when we take this background into account can we begin to understand that the binding of Isaac is God's way of teaching Abraham that *patria potestas* has no place in Judaism. The Bible is saying to the people of the covenant: *just as you do not own your land, you do not own your children*. Thus is born the biblical idea of parent-as-educator as opposed to parent-as-owner.

This is also what the Bible means when it speaks of God as a parent. God is a non-interventionist parent. During the early years of His people's history He intervened to deliver them from slavery, but increasingly as they matured He too moved from parent-as-owner to parent-as-educator. God does not do our work for us. He teaches us how to do it for Him. For God Himself abides by the laws He gives us.

The Great Partnership, p. 179

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How does this quote sum-up the message contained in this week's *Covenant & Conversation*?
2. Do you think western society has been influenced by the message of this story and Judaism's approach to children?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. According to the explanation Rabbi Sacks gives about the laws of ritual impurity, why is a woman *tamei* after giving birth?
2. Why do you think the Torah has to go out of its way to teach that children have their own rights and are not the property of their parents?
3. How does the Torah teach this message?
4. Why do you think God ignored the reply of the first two groups of angels in the story from the Talmud? Why did He ask them in the first place if He wasn't planning to listen to their advice?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur inscribed** by Rabbi Sacks? Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question in response to a Covenant & Conversation Family Edition.

Entrants must be 18 or younger. Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. This Midrashic story of the angels comes to teach us Judaism's approach to humanity. Humanity is flawed, and God knows and understands this. If God had wanted to create a perfect creature to inhabit His world He would have – angels are perfect servants of God, but God chose to limit them to a purely spiritual existence in heaven and not place them in this world. Perhaps the Midrash is highlighting this, and while the angels cannot understand the worth of humankind, God does. He understands with compassion and understanding.
2. All people sin. No one is perfect. Life is complex and humans are complex, and despite the best efforts of people to strive for perfection, no one can actually achieve that. The story in the Talmud suggests that God is understanding and shows compassion to humankind in this light. If God can show understanding of human failings and imperfections, then we should strive to do so also, both when it comes to ourselves and those around us.
3. Parents have a responsibility to educate their children in the values that will help them to become good people living meaningful lives based on those values. However, all people are flawed and fail, no matter how hard their parents try to prepare them for life. Judaism does consider parents responsible for the sins of their pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah children. However, this approach to the post-birth sin offering perhaps gives the mother a channel to express her concern for protecting her child in the future.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. In previous generations adults believed that a child was their property until they became adults in their own right. Therefore parents would often force their children to work to earn money for the family, and would not consider that their children had any rights of their own. Korczak believed that every child has rights of their own, and adults have a responsibility to children in this respect. Judaism speaks in similar terms demanding certain responsibilities from parents, such as providing their children with an education, and protection and care.
2. One message in *The Core Idea* is that all people are flawed and that is why the mother brings a sin offering on behalf of her child. Korczak saw that in every child there existed the potential for good or for evil and it is the responsibility of parents and teachers to nurture the inclination for good. In *Thinking More Deeply* we see that the burnt offering the mother brings reminds us of the Binding of Isaac and its message that children are not the property of parents, but have rights of their own.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. The burnt offering the mother brings after her child is born reminds us of the Binding of Isaac, where Abraham was asked to bring Isaac as a Burnt Offering. Rabbi Sacks says here that the message of the story of the Binding of Isaac is that children are not the property of parents.
2. There is no question that our society's eventual arrival at this idea has been influenced by the ideas found in the Torah and Judaism in general. Judaism has a very clear approach to the rights of the child and the responsibility of parents to the child.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. The terms *tamei* and *tahor* are technical terms referring to the condition that prevents one from entering the Tabernacle or Temple. The Temple is a symbol of the presence of God within the human domain. It is essential that the experience of being in the domain of the holy was an experience of pure transcendence. What therefore bars us from entering the holy is anything that reminds us or others of our mortality: the fact that we are born and will one day die. Contact with death or even birth has this effect.
2. This was far from a given in ancient societies, and in fact in all societies until the Victorian period in England (see *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*). The Torah's ideas on this were revolutionary and no doubt have influenced society's approach to this in our day.
3. Rabbi Sacks mentions several examples of how this message is expressed in the biblical narrative. The name given to the first child born – Cain (from the Hebrew meaning "ownership") – saying, "I have acquired a child through God" (Gen. 4:1), implying if you treat your child as a possession, then you may turn him into a murderer. The story of the binding of Isaac teaches that parents do not own their children. This message is also contained in the tenth plague – the death of the firstborn. All firstborn Israelites were to have been Priests in the service of God. Only after the sin of the Golden Calf did this role devolve on the tribe of Levi. The same idea lies behind the ritual of the redemption of the firstborn. A parents' responsibility to their child is also a concept developed in the halachic literature.
4. See *The Core Idea* answer 1.