

5 Parental Perspectives

On giving birth

Do mothers experience elements of both 'greatness' and 'smallness' in the act of giving birth? Ask them! Today's Torah discussion is a great one to take up with a group of mothers. Why not share this leaflet with your local mother's group? And for another valuable take on the same topic, engage the fathers as well. Here is what one mother of three said:



"There was a moment during the birth of my first child when I thought, 'I'm going to die. My body is about to rip in two and I will die.' It was scary. It was scary the second time too, but I knew I'd make it through."



"In an affluent society that medicates so readily for every ache and pain, it is confronting to experience the raw, primitive, physicality and pain of giving birth. It's incredible how the body takes over, it knows what to do."



"My second child became dangerously ill after birth. The realization of how easy it is to lose your child... that as a parent I am not all-powerful... well, the preciousness and fragility of life really hit home."



"At times you feel totally powerless before your child. There is a sense of: 'I don't know how to do this!' Fathers often feel this. Mothers who have difficulty breastfeeding sometimes feel like a failure."



"When I was finally alone, resting, quiet, my baby girl asleep beside me... it was a beautiful moment of intimacy. I remember looking at her, marveling at this little life, and realizing how 'small' I am compared to a miracle of such magnitude."



Why reflect on Torah?

The Church must never forget that "it draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted."

Nostra Aetate, 4; Oct 28, 1965

With this statement, based on Romans 11:17-24, the Second Vatican Council unveiled a new era for Christians and Jews. After nearly 2,000 years of tragic division, we are now in a position to affirm the profound spiritual links between these two faiths.

Christianity did not emerge out of the blue; it grew out of Judaism. Jesus himself was a devout Jew, as was Mary, the apostles and most of the early Church. Without the rich soil of Jewish faith in which she is planted, the Church cannot grow to full maturity.

Our roots in Judaism include the Hebrew Scriptures, or the 'Old Testament' as we know it. Sometimes Christians tend to overlook the Old Testament, viewing it as less important than the Gospels, when in fact the Gospels depend on the Old Testament for their very foundation.

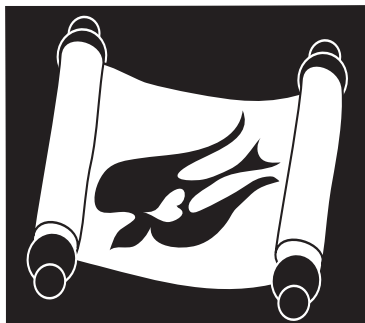
For this reason, this leaflet series *In the Light of Torah* is designed to encourage Christians to read the Old Testament. Specifically, it invites us to read the Torah (the first five books of the bible) week by week, drawing on Jewish sources and traditions to help us gain insight into our own Christian faith.

In the Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

In the Light of Torah is a parish leaflet series designed to encourage Christians to be more attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their own sacred Scriptures, and to the gift of Judaism which gave us Jesus, the Living Torah. Text by Teresa Pirola. Illustrations by Francine Pirola. © The Story Source, 2009. Further reading: www.batkol.info. Reproduction of this leaflet permitted for non-commercial church use.





Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 12:1 - 15:33

Today's Torah portion continues the theme of ritual purity. Particularly jarring to contemporary ears are the opening verses that declare a woman who has just given birth to be in a state of ritual impurity:

"The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the children of Israel, saying: If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days ... (Lev.12:1-2)

Does this statement bother you? It has certainly bothered Jewish biblical commentators through the generations! Join with the rabbis in exploring these verses.

Tasting Torah

When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or turtledove for a sin offering."(Lev.12:6)

Judaism held procreation as a blessing and a mission. Why, then, should a mother, having just given birth, be declared "unclean"? At the conclusion of her purification period, the Torah calls for both a 'burnt offering' and a 'sin offering.' In particular, commentators have puzzled over the Torah's insistence on a 'sin offering.'

Touching Torah

The burnt offering is less problematic. Abravanel (1), suggests that this was a way for the mother to "cleave to her maker, Who had performed wondrous things for her, in delivering her from the pain and danger of childbirth." In other words, this sacrificial action is one of praise and thanksgiving. But why the need for a sin offering when the mother has committed no sin?

One explanation becomes apparent if we delve into the *midrash* (storytelling traditions of Judaism). There we find contrasting approaches. On the one hand, Rabbi Levi marvels at the wonders of pregnancy and birth: "Human beings entrust to [the Creator] a drop of fluid in privacy, and the Holy One, blessed be He, openly returns to them completed and perfected human individuals. Is this not a matter for praise?" (2)

Deeper into Torah

By contrast, in the *midrash* we also find: "If you had seen from what impurity and dross [a man] came, you would not have been able to look at him! ... From whence do you come? From a fetid drop..." (3)

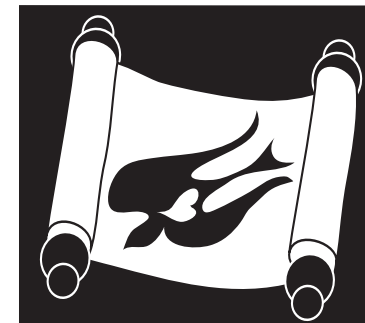
Whereas Rabbi Levi focuses on procreation as a holy wonder, the other midrashic source dwells on the miserable insignificance of human beings compared to the majesty of the Creator. The latter has echoes in the Book of Isaiah. There the prophet witnesses a heavenly vision with angelic voices proclaiming "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts (Isa. 6:3).*" And how does the prophet respond? "*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips (Isa. 6:5).*"

Perhaps then, this is the sense in which the Torah speaks of the impurity and sin offering of a woman after childbirth: she is profoundly in touch with both the greatness and power of the Creator and the 'smallness' and 'weakness' of the human who is created.

Doing Torah

Our reflections suggest that the 'sin offering' closing the mother's purification period can be interpreted not as atonement for her sin, but as an expression of the 'gap' in perfection between human beings and their Creator.

- In your own life, do you tend to focus on God's greatness, or your smallness? What rituals do we have to express something of this contrast?
- What is the difference between a mature awareness of one's imperfections and poor self-esteem?



A Gospel connection

Note the reference to pigeon and turtledove in Lev. 12:6.

As Christians reading the story of Jesus' birth and infancy, we reminded that Jesus grew up in a Jewish family that was faithful to Jewish traditions.

Read Luke 2:21-24 and compare the details of purification with those in Lev.12.

(1) 15th c. Torah scholar. Quoted in Leibowitz, 177.

(2) *Vayikra Rabbah*, Tazria XIV, 2-3.

(3) *Konteres Aharon, Midrash Yelamdenu*. Quoted in Leibowitz, 179.

Sources: *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus* (NY, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, (Jerusalem,1993); Scripture quotations: *NRSV*.