

## Israel' s Birth Pangs

This Shabbat, we read the double portion of *Tazria–Metzora*. The opening of this portion deals with the laws of ritual impurity that follow childbirth. When the mother emerges from her impurity, the Torah issues a strange commandment – that calls for the new mother to bring a sin offering, a *Chatat*, and an elevation offering, an *Olah* which was totally consumed by the fire. (Leviticus, 12:6)

Why must she bring these sacrifices? The sin offering, as the name implies, was brought on the altar when a person commits a sin. What sin does the new mother commit that she should be obligated to offer the sin sacrifice? The Midrash was concerned by this very matter. The students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai approached their teacher in search of clarification to this problem. He replied that during the pain of labor the woman vows never to be intimate with her husband again, lest she face a recurrence of the suffering of birthing. But after the event, she regrets her vow and that is cause for her to bring the sin offering. (See Midrash Aggadah, *ibid*)

The elevation offering, according to the *Meshech Chochma*, was synonymous with a holiday offering. When a pilgrim would come to the Temple for a festival, he would come after a long absence. So, he would bring an elevation offering of sight – *Olat Rieeah* – a person would not come to visit the face of God empty handed. The *Olah* offering in that context was a sacrifice of meeting. The new mother, in a similar vein, was prohibited access to the Temple because of her ritual impurity. Now that she has become pure again, she celebrates her return and her meeting of God, as though it were a holiday, with the elevation offering. (See his comments to the verse; Lev., *ibid*)

The Jewish world celebrated the 67<sup>th</sup> birthday of the state of Israel this past week. And the themes of childbirth and sacrifice are relevant as we think about the State of Israel. The pain of labor, the moments of anguish before birth are feelings that millennia of Jewish people understood. The Jewish world, pre–statehood, suffered in myriad ways. The expectant mother knows a baby is coming, but the waiting and the pain is too much to bear. The Jewish people have always been expectant – we've been expecting the birth of a state and return to our ancestral home and a return to dignity for 2000 years. We pray those words 3 times a day in our silent prayer; we profess our faith in a redeemed future. These have ever been our core hopes. But waiting – waiting when the pain was intolerable – and not knowing the exact arrival had caused a significant disenchantment; many foreswore affiliation to the tribe of suffering and the life of wandering.

During the era of Statehood, we are still expectant. We are not yet in a redeemed state; if that weren't painfully obvious every day we read the paper and listen to the news. Israel is a state that is always becoming. And our members lose faith. How can we be a light onto the nations when we are stumbling in the dark? But the birth pangs are reason for optimism. We must write no one off and we must send no one out.

The return to the life of the holy is a elevating. We are meeting God with an intimacy and closeness, face to face, in ways that we never have before. This is the time to offer our thanks; this holiday – the birth of the State of Israel, is a holiday of reunion and return. The soul of Israel is reborn and the connection to the holy is alive.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach and Moadim L'Simcha Legeulah Shleimah, and a special Mazal tov to my sister and her husband, Avigayil and Reuven, on the birth of their first son – may he grow to Chuppah, Torah and Maasim Tovim...

**Rabbi Menashe East**