

"JEWISH MOTHERS"  
I. Co-Creators

The figure of the Jewish mother has always been rather sacrosanct in traditional Jewish life and lore. Even in ages of transition, during and after the Emancipation, when all that was sacred was held up to criticism and analysis, the Jewish mother somehow remained above the din of battle and emerged unscathed.

In recent years, however, the classical type which comes to mind when we speak of the Jewish mother, has become more and more replaced by a new and competing sort of mother. Furthermore, there has been a trend in English literature, both in this country and in England, subjecting the Jewish mother to withering criticism, and attempting to debunk her value and influence.

We shall leave this contemporary reaction against the Jewish mother to our next sermon. This morning we shall make some remarks about a universal aspect of motherhood, namely, motherhood as creativity.

There can be little question that childbearing is the most immediately, directly, and obviously creative act known to mankind, even if it is not deliberate, but unconscious and perhaps even involuntary. By the act of giving birth, a woman performs the creative act of perpetuating the species, of adding another link in the chain of generations.

But is this act purely biological, or does it have any religious value? Is it an ordinary, natural process, devoid of special spiritual significance, or does it, even as a natural act, participate in a higher order of meaning?

Our question is intensified by what appears to be a decidedly negative answer. In reading of the phenomenon of childbirth, at the very beginning of this morning's Sidra, we learn that it occasions a period of tum'ah or uncleanness, for a period of seven days for the birth of a boy and fourteen for a girl. Does this not indicate that the religious significance, if any, of childbirth is negative, that perhaps the Torah rejects its animality, its primitiveness, its thorough and exclusive naturalness, as opposed to any transcendent significance?

To answer that question, and therefore to derive some Jewish insight into the nature of motherhood from the sources of our tradition, we shall draw on three different expositors of Judaism: a late medieval Spanish Jew, the author of the Or Ha-Hayyim; Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, the spiritual leader of 19th century Polish Jewry; and an Italian Jew, a modern scholar, the late Professor Cassuto, who was Professor of Bible at Hebrew University.

Let us turn to the first act of childbirth recorded in the Torah. Eve, the first woman, gives birth to her first child, Cain. She calls him Cain because, the Torah tells us in



Until now I was only a creature; now I am also a creator. My own body has become the instrument of an act which heretofore was reserved only for God, that of creation. God has invited man -- nay, woman! -- to become His co-creator. And so, with the Lord, I too have created a man, a child.

This means that childbirth is an act of imitatio Dei, imitation of God, it is an act of participation in the divine activity. As such, it is characterized by the quality of kedushah, holiness. When man performs something that is principally a divine act, he participates in the divine holiness.

That is why, the Rabbi of Kotzk teaches us, childbirth is followed by a period of tum'ah, of ritual impurity. For the principle to remember is this: wherever there is kedushah, and then the holiness departs, the void is filled with its opposite, with its mirror image: tum'ah, impurity. The halakhic state of impurity marks the contrast between the sacred and the profane, it highlights the grace of holiness which was present and which now has departed. The best illustration of this relationship of tum'ah being attendant upon the departed kedushah, is that of life and death. The chief source of ritual impurity is a dead body, a cadaver. According to the Kotzker's explanation, we understand it: as long as man lives and breathes, as long as he is possessed of life, he participates in the holiness of the Living God. He bears a soul, a spark of God within him. Living man therefore possesses kedushah.

But when he dies, when his spirit leaves him, when his life seeps away, then kedushah departs, and tum'ah must enter. That is why the cadaver is a source of tum'ah. Similarly, when a woman bears life within her, she is in a state of imitation of God, she is a co-creator with Him, and therefore she reaches a high level of kedushah. The act of childbearing is itself pregnant with religious experience. But once the act is done, and the child is born, and the body has been emptied of this precious burden it has borne for these many months, kedushah has left it, and hence there must follow a period of tum'ah, of uncleanness.

So that the state of ritual impurity attendant upon childbirth is not meant as the negative judgment upon motherhood but, on the contrary, as a tribute to its essential kedushah.

In that case, we can understand why the period of tum'ah should be twice as long for the birth of a girl as for the birth of a boy. For if the birth of a child, a human being, is a high form of creativity which bestows kedushah upon the mother, and an equivalent degree of tum'ah when the act of childbirth has been accomplished, then the birth of a girl calls for twice the length of the period of impurity; for the female of the species, unlike the male, possesses, in turn, the potential for bearing yet another generation and repeating this sublime act of creativity. To give birth to one who in turn can give birth, to create one who will later create, is to achieve double the holiness of bearing a human being

who cannot perform this act within himself; and therefore the period of tum'ah is twice as long, just as a larger object casts a longer shadow. Thus, explains the author of the Or Ha-Hayyim, the longer period of tum'ah for the birth of a girl is not an anti-feminist notion but, quite the contrary, an acknowledgement of the natural creativity of woman.

So that motherhood is an act of the imitation of God. This does not make of all mothers either saints or artists, but it does mean that there is something innate, something integral to motherhood, that inspires reverence and demand<sup>s</sup> hesitation at the very least before holding up the institution to ridicule.

And just as woman, by virtue of motherhood, imitates God, God returns the compliment: He imitates mother. For thus we read in today's Haftorah, the Haftorah for Rosh Hodesh: ל'כד  
אֲפֹכַח כְּאִשָּׁה וְאֶתְחַנֵּן כְּאִמָּה ; "even as a man whom his  
mother comforteth, so will I comfort thee."

We in our generation have been personal witnesses to God taking on the role of mother. For we have seen God comfort our people. For so does that verse end with two significant words: וְיִחְנֶנִי יְהוָה , "and in Jerusalem shall you be comforted."