



The Discovery of Birth

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Each of us was brought into this world by someone who allowed their body to become home to a stranger.

This is what mothers do before we meet our children: watch, sometimes in wonder, and sometimes in grief, as the bodies which were once ours alone grow, bend, ache, and change in ways that make us unrecognizable to ourselves. Feel our ribs widen, our bodies force themselves apart, to create room for new life. Bind ourselves to a person whose face we have never seen.

We all know this, but most of the time, we ignore its magnitude. It makes sense: to live with that sort of debt is impossible, and any gratitude we might offer seems insignificant in the face of the gift.

But once a woman has experienced pregnancy, she can no longer ignore that basic fact. For the first time she understands, deep in her body, what it means to have been born. And maybe it is that new awareness of what her own mother did to bring her into this world that underlies the Torah's regimen for a new mother:



ויקרא יב:ז

⁶ובמלאת ימי טהרה לִבָּן אוֹ לְבַת תָּבִיא כֶּבֶשׂ בֶּן שָׁנָתוֹ לְעֹלָה וּבֶן יוֹנָה אוֹ תֵר לְחֹטָאת אֶל פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד
אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן: ⁷וְהִקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה' וְכָפַר עָלֶיהָ וְטָהְרָה מִמִּקְרַדְמִיָּה זֹאת תּוֹרַת הַיִּלָּדֹת לְזָכָר אוֹ לְנִקְבָּה:

Vayikra 12:6-7

⁶On the completion of her period of purification, for either son or 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 a turtledove for a *hatat* offering. ⁷He shall offer it before God and make expiation on her behalf; she shall then be pure from her flow of blood. Such are the rituals concerning her who bears a child, male or female.

Many commentaries, who assume that the *hatat* offering always relates to a sin (like *het*), puzzle over the command for the new mother to bring it as one of her offerings. What sin does a woman commit in childbirth?

R. Behaye ben Asher¹ suggests, somewhat painfully, that the *hatat* a new mother brings is not related to her own sin, but to the sin of *Havah*, the first mother:

רבינו בחיי ויקרא יב:ז

ויתכן לפרש שאין הקרבן הזה מצד חטא של עצמה רק מצד אמה שהיא היתה אם כל חי... והיולדת הזו כאמה בתה במעשה החטא, כי הענפים הם מקולקלים בקלקול השורש, ועל כן יצריכנה הכתוב קרבן לכפר על החטא הקדמוני.

R. Behaye on Vayikra 12:7

It is possible to understand the reason for this offering as not so much related to her as to her “mother,” i.e., the first woman *Havah*.... This woman who gave birth now may be perceived as the branch of a contaminated root, daughter of a corrupted mother and as

¹ Spain, 13th-14th c. commentator on the Torah.



such some of the mother's contamination was transmitted to her. Hence the Torah requires that she atones for this by bringing a sin-offering after giving birth.

Rabbeinu Behaye's explanation is a difficult and painful one. For Rabbeinu Behaye, it is this lineage of mothers and daughters that explains the sin that triggers the new mother's requirement to bring a *ḥatat*. All mothers, in his reading, are implicated in *Havah's* sin when she ate from the forbidden tree, as a result of which women experience pain in childbirth. All mothers, then, bring a sin offering after they have given birth in order to atone for our ancestral mother's sin. He points to a conception of motherhood that is essentially and irrevocably bound up with the eternal stain of sin, for which every mother must atone forevermore.

Rabbeinu Behaye's orientation, however, is important in that he helps us understand that the woman who brings the new *ḥatat* is not an isolated actor, but is bound up with all the women in her ancestral line who have crossed the boundary into motherhood before her, a long chain of women extending all the way back to *Havah*. While we need not adopt his painful interpretation of the meaning of that link, we can reclaim it in a way that does not point to inherited shame, but to our interconnectedness with the women who have come before us.

By reorienting our understanding of the mother bringing the offering as a woman in a long chain of daughters and mothers stemming all the way back to *Havah*, we might understand the sin not as one committed **by** an ancestral mother, but one committed **against** that mother and every subsequent mother in the chain: the willed ignorance of what our mothers endure in order to bring us into the world, ignorance that the woman bringing the offering, who has just endured pregnancy and birth herself, can no longer sustain.



Like Rabbeinu Behaye highlights, every woman in the long chain of mothers and daughters who brings a child into the world does so through pain:

בראשית ג:טז

אֵל הָאִשָּׁה אָמַר הָרְבָּה אֲרֻבָּה עֲצָבוֹנָךְ וְהִרְבֵּךְ בְּעֵצָב תֵּלְדִי בָנִים

Bereishit 3:16

And to the woman [God] said, “I will greatly expand your hard labor—and your pregnancies; in hardship shall you bear children.”

While we most often think of Havah’s curse as bound up with mothers, the truth is that it is also inextricably related to the experience of being a child—anyone’s child. To be a human being is to come into the world with a debt that can never be repaid. It is to know that someone chose to endure suffering so that you might exist. Having crossed the divide from daughter to mother, the woman who brings the hatat now understands, viscerally—for the first time, or with subsequent children anew—what that suffering entails.

Maybe this is why the Torah commands a woman who has just given birth to bring a sin offering—not because of the pregnancy or the birth, but because of the deliberate ignorance that came before. At this moment, she understands what another human being did to bring her into the world—and she understands that, until now, her gratitude has been incomplete. For the sin of not recognizing the gifts she was given that she only now understands, she must bring a sin offering.

Maybe in this moment, as she brings the hatat, the woman pauses for a moment and thinks of her long line of maternal ancestors, beginning with her own mother and stretching all the way back to Havah. Maybe she silently mouths the words: “Thank you. I understand now.”

Because in this moment, as she begins or continues her parenting journey, she finally understands what it means to be someone's child.