



Giving Birth to Hope

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Chapter 12 of the Book of Vayikra deals with the sacrifice of the woman who has given birth:

ויקרא יב:ב,ד,ו

אִשָּׁה כִּי תִזְרִיעַ וְיָלְדָה...⁴ בְּכָל קֹדֶשׁ לֹא תִגַּע וְאֶל הַמִּקְדָּשׁ לֹא תָבֹא עַד מְלֵאת יָמֵי טְהָרָה: ...⁶ וּבְמֵלֶאֱת יָמֵי טְהָרָה לִבָּן אוֹ לְבַת תָּבִיא כֶּבֶשׂ בֶּן שָׁנָתוֹ לַעֲלֹה וּבֶן יוֹנָה אוֹ תֵר לַחֲטָאת אֶל פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד אֶל הַכֹּהֵן:

Leviticus 12:2,4,6

²If a woman conceives and bears [a child] and gives birth... ⁴anything holy she should not touch and to the sanctuary she should not go until the days of her impurity are finished... and when the days of her impurity are finished... ⁶she should bring a year old lamb for a burnt offering and a dove or pigeon for a sin offering to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, to the priest.

What does birth symbolize and what is the meaning of bringing birth into the sanctuary?

What is the nature of the sacrifice a mother of a newborn brings and what does it teach about the essence of birth and the essence of humans?



The birth of a child can be perceived from one perspective as a sometimes despairing repetition of a limited human reality dictated by the previous generation. But from a different perspective, it can be seen as an illustration of the range of human possibilities and the breadth of human freedom.

The *midrash* in Vayikra Rabbah seeks to frame the woman's entry into the Temple in the second way, as an act that invites hope—an act that invites the possibility of standing before a different future by illustrating a variety of future possibilities. The *midrash* achieves this by creating a parallel between “If a woman conceives” and God's statement at the brink of the creation of humans: “Let us make humanity” (Genesis 1:26): between the birth of a human being and the creation of humanity; between the system of sacrifices and the story of the world and human existence.

Vayikra Rabbah on the verse “If a woman conceives” opens with a familiar interpretive pattern: the *petihta* (proem).¹ In this case, the opening verse—which the *midrash* weaves into the Torah portion—is from the Book of Psalms: “אַחֲרֵי וְקִדְמָה צִרְתָּנִי - You have formed me behind and before” (Psalm 139:5). This verse is interpreted by various sages in diverse ways, all of which deal with the characteristics of the creation known as Adam ha-Rishon, the first human. Choosing a verse from the Book of Psalms concerning the creation of humanity as the opening for a *derashah* on the woman in Vayikra Rabbah creates a comparison between the creation of the first human and what occurs in every birth of a new human being. I cite some examples:

¹ The *petihta* opens with a verse that, at first glance, seems far removed from the *parashah* under discussion—both in its content and its biblical location. The art of the homilist is to weave a path from that opening verse back to the portion at hand.



ויקרא רבה יד:א

אמר רבי יוחנן אם זכה אדם נוחר שני עולמות, הנה והבא, הדא הוא דכתיב: אחר וקדם צרתני, ואם לאו
בא לתן דין וחשבון...
רבי שמואל בר נחמן בשעה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא אדם הראשון, אנדרוגינוס בראו...
אמר רבי ברכיה ורבי חלבון ורבי שמואל בר נחמן בשעה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא אדם הראשון מסוף
העולם ועד סופו מלוא כל העולם כלו בראו...
על דעתיה דריש לקיש... אם זכה אדם אומרים לו אתה קדמת לכל מעשה בראשית, ואם לאו אומרים לו
יתוש קדמך.

Vayikra Rabbah 14:1

R. Yohanan said: If a person merits, they inherit two worlds, this one and the next, as it is written: "You have formed me behind and before." If not, they must give an account and a reckoning....

R. Shmuel bar Nahman said: At the hour that the Holy Blessed One created the first human, God created him as an *androgynos*....²

R. Berekhiah, R. Helbo [in the name of] R. Shmuel bar Nahman said: At the the hour the Holy Blessed One created the first human, God created him from one end of the world to the other, filling the entire world....

According to Reish Lakish... if a person merits, they tell him, "You preceded all the works of creation"; and if not, they tell him: "An ant preceded you, a worm preceded you."

The common denominator among all these homilies is the freedom of the first human. His fate is open—will he merit not only this world but also the World to Come, or will he be called to give a reckoning? His gender identity is open, as is his place in the world and his position in the hierarchy of creation. The first human figure is created with potential, with the freedom to shape a future that is not yet fully dictated by circumstances.

² Biologically with both feminine and masculine qualities, as some verses seem to indicate, for example: "creating the human in the image of God, creating him male and female" (Genesis 1:27).

The creation of the first human is a creation of potential in the fullest sense of the word. The moment of “Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness” is a moment almost without limitations—a moment where the first human figure is born into immense freedom to shape their future.

All these possibilities—the potential of the human at the moment of creation—are brought by the *midrash* into the moment of birth—into the newborn, and into the mother standing in the Temple. Granted, a person is born into specific life circumstances. They are not the sole influence on their world. They are limited and not entirely free. Their freedom and their abilities are constrained. Yet, our *midrash* seeks to make present, at the moment of birth the notion of hope, hope for space, change, and opportunity.

What are the characteristics of hope? In his book *There is Hope*, Professor Avi Sagi discusses hope and describes its qualities.³ I will note four of these traits as a conceptual framework for the moment of birth described in Parashat Tazria through the eyes of the *midrash*.

First, hope brings the possibility of the future into the present: Although hope refers to the future, it is actually a testimony to a person’s state in the present.

Second, hope is an active stance: A hopeful person is not someone who simply waits and expects the future to change. Rather, much like a dreamer, a hopeful person actively brings the future into the present.

Third, hope is based on freedom: It rests on a person’s ability to liberate themselves from the limitations of their existence and shape their own future. Hope means freeing the human persona from the constraints of the present, allowing it to open up to a different future. That is to say, hope relates to a realm of possibilities. It is an expression of the human being as a

³ Avi Sagi, *Yesh Tikvah: Masa Filosofi-Kiyumi be-Ikvot ha-Tikvah* (2025).



free agent, capable of breaking free from their past and their circumstances—rather than allowing the past to dictate the future.

Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, hope is based on uncertainty: After all, where there is certainty, there is no freedom and no room for a different future. Therefore, hope is based on uncertainty, which the individual channels in order to establish an active, open, and perhaps even creative mental stance toward the future.

Birth illustrates the future already in the present. A newborn baby belongs almost entirely to the future. The baby's presence in the world—as well as the mother's arrival at the Temple—constitutes a kind of bringing the future into the present, an engagement with the future happening right now. "Human life," Sagi explains, "is a drama starring the freedom that strives for liberation from the shackles of reality, set against the consciousness of the bonds of human existence that limit one's choices. Out of this drama, in the movement between accepting reality and breaking free from it, hope grows."⁴ Adam ha-Rishon, the first human figure, described in the *midrash* as possessing rich and diverse potential, demonstrates the ability to realize a fundamental human virtue: the ability to transcend a given situation.

By creating a comparison between the first human—the person of potential and hope—and the newborn, Vayikra Rabbah clarifies the meaning of the woman's entry into the sanctuary. Along with her enters a human being who is entirely potential. Like the first human, they have a vast range of possibilities before them. In doing so, the mother, as a mother to a newborn compared to the first human, brings hope into the Temple.

This description also offers an explanation for one of the mysteries surrounding the mother. Leviticus 12:6 describes: "and when the days of her impurity are finished... she should bring...

⁴ Sagi, *Yesh Tikvah*, p. 41.



a dove or pigeon for a sin offering to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, to the priest.” Why must the woman who has given birth bring a sin offering? She has not sinned and moreover she has brought new life into the world!

A sin offering, like any process of atonement and repentance, is a religious mechanism that allows one to turn from the past toward a different future. It allows for the breaking of past patterns and liberation from them. Bringing a sin offering reflects hope; it contains the statement that one can change course from sin, corruption, or distortion toward a different, repaired future—one where possibilities are broader than the circumstances that birthed them.

The role of the woman who has given birth is to bring hope into the Temple. The sin offering she brings reinforces, echoes, and clarifies that “it is possible to emerge from the limitations of the existing and open up to another reality.” As she holds her baby—the new human being added to the world—she “brings the possibility of the future into the present.”⁵ In doing so, she presents a human existence that is not necessarily limited by its circumstances.

⁵ Sagi, *Yesh Tikvah*, p. 39.

