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**Shabbat Tazria/ Shabbat Rosh Hodesh
Shabbat Hahodesh
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The Hand That Does Not Reach

Torah Reading: Leviticus 12:1 -13:59; Numbers 28:9 - 15

Maftir: Exodus 12:1 - 20

Haftarah Reading: Ezekiel 45:16 - 46:18

We like to think of childbirth as miraculous and joyful (which we certainly hope it will be), but it is also a bloody, painful, and sometimes dangerous process. Even today, after the advent of modern medicine, women continue to face perilous complications and even the risk of death during pregnancy and labor. It is thus not surprising, at least to me, that in the biblical world – as we see in Chap. 12 of Leviticus, the opening of this week's parashah, Tazria – that giving birth was a source of ritual impurity, which often marks proximity to blood and death, and that once a woman had completed the process, she would be required to bring a sacrifice both to lift that impurity and to mark having come through this awesome experience:

Lev. 12:6-7: On 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 purification offering. He shall offer it before the Lord and make expiation on her behalf...

It is true that while the basic concepts of impurity and sacrifice may make sense in the biblical context, there are many questions about how these concepts are applied in this case, including the length of the impurity (which is twice as long if the baby is female than if it is male) and why the woman's offering is for the purpose of "expiation," rather than, let us say, Thanksgiving. However, many scholars have already devoted much attention to these questions, so instead, I would like to focus here on a different aspect of the laws of this sacrifice.

Although we will be soon singing at our seders about a goat purchased for a mere "2 zuzim," bringing even a small animal such as a sheep or goat for sacrifice could be a considerable expense for an ordinary person in the ancient world, and hence the Torah ends the chapter and its discussion of this topic by allowing for this modification to its original requirement:

Lev. 12:8 If, however, her means do not suffice for a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a purification offering. The priest shall make expiation on her behalf, and she shall be pure.

In fact, this is one of three examples in Lev. where the Torah makes such an exception. Lev. 5 addresses a person who has sinned accidentally through a lapse of memory (as for example forgetting having come into contact with a source of ritual impurity and therefore contaminating something else, or having made an oath and therefore violating it) but later realizes their error. The prescribed atonement for such an inadvertent sin is a sacrifice of a female sheep or goat, but:

Lev. 5:7 ...if his means do not suffice for a sheep, he shall bring to the Lord, as his penalty for that of which he is guilty, two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a purification offering and the other for a burnt offering.

Indeed, 5:11 even allows for the possibility that the sinner won't even be able to afford a bird offering and substitutes a grain offering in such a case instead. Similarly, in Lev. 14 (which we will read next week), a person who has recovered from the skin disease known in the bible as "tzara'at" is expected to bring three lambs (two male and one female) for the final purification process, but once again:

Lev. 14:21-22 If, however, he is poor and his means are insufficient, he shall take one male lamb for a reparation offering... and two turtledoves or two pigeons, depending on his means, one to be the purification offering and the other the burnt offering.

What is also noteworthy is that in each of these cases, sufficiency or lack is characterized through Hebrew phrases that literally translated speak of the "reach" of someone's hand: "im lo tagi'ah yado/if his hand does not arrive at" (5:7); "im lo timtzah yada/if her hand does not find" (12:8); "v'en yado maseget/and his hand does not reach (far enough)" (14:21; see also 5:11).

Moreover, given that the first two of these are nearly identical in language (the verbs are different but function in a similar manner), the earliest rabbinic commentary to Lev. makes the identical comment to both, other than that one is framed in the masculine and the other feminine, as in the verses:

One does not say to him/her to borrow [the money] or to work at his/her craft [to eventually earn enough].

That is a person who cannot at this moment afford the “regular” sacrifice is not to be delayed, or shamed or compelled into incurring an obligation beyond that person’s current means. And, in fact, the rabbis take this one step further:

If s/he has a lamb but does not have [its/his] needs, from [in the verse do we know that] s/he brings the poor person’s sacrifice? This is what it says: “enough for a lamb.”

This can be understood in (at least) two ways. One possibility is that the person can afford the lamb, but not the accompanying items that typically should be brought with an animal sacrifice (such as wine for libations – that is, “its,” the sacrifice’s, needs) – and thus is exempted from sacrificing the lamb, so as not to have to incur the additional outlay. The other is that the lamb itself currently represents the person’s needs; i.e., the sum of the person’s wealth and economic welfare are invested in the ownership of the lamb and its earning potential, and without it the person would risk impoverishment. Surely this person should not be required to sacrifice the lamb nonetheless. In either understanding, the same theme continues: where God has allowed for mercy and understanding of a person’s circumstances, so that no one be deprived of an opportunity for atonement, purification, re-admittance into the fullness of the community and its rites, so too the human beings who administer the sacrificial system must be attentive and merciful and flexible enough to treat each person as they are.

A similar concern, with another possible resolution, also appears in our special maftir reading this week for Shabbat haHodesh, which we read each year on the Shabbat before or (as is the case this year) of Rosh Hodesh Nisan, in preparation for Passover. The passage we read, Ex. 12:1-20, begins by indicating that Nisan will become the first month of the Jewish calendar (yes, even if our New Year, Rosh Hashanah takes place in the seventh month, Tishrei) – hence the reason we read it at this occasion. It then turns to the commandment for the Israelites to perform the first-ever Passover sacrifice, a prerequisite to the communal redemption from slavery that is imminent:

Ex. 12:3 *...on the tenth of this month each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household.*

And as in our cases in Lev., this is immediately followed by an important qualification:

Ex. 12:4 *But if the household is too small for a lamb, let him share one with a neighbor who dwells nearby...*

The most basic, literalist meaning of the verse is that the household has too few members to be able to consume an entire lamb themselves. But here I want to make note of the commentary in Eitz Hayyim, which in turn paraphrases the commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a German rabbi of the nineteenth century:

...Pesah, although a family celebration, is not to be observed in isolation. It is an occasion for families to join with other families and create a community. More than the poor need the rich, the rich need the poor. Let those whose households are too small to absorb all the blessings that God has given them seek out their neighbors and share the bounty with them.

Those who have the means to acquire more than they themselves can consume (because their household is small in numbers) should take in and provide for others. And I would suggest, the other side of the same coin is that when a family is small in means, unable to provide for their own lamb, it

is the responsibility of others in the community to be sure they are nonetheless included among and together with other households.

There is a careful and crucial balance being struck in both Ex. and Lev., in both these means of making participation possible for all. In both, persons of limited means are not exempted from the ritual. Atonement, purity, redemption – these do demand something of us, every one of us, an investment, a sacrifice. But where accommodations can be made to ensure everyone has the ability to participate, where some might not be able to participate otherwise, these accommodations must be made.

We are approaching the holiday that celebrates the redemptive power of God’s “mighty hand and outstretched arm” – but we do so amidst human beings whose hands cannot always attain the means they need. May we follow the Divine commands of Ex. and Lev. so that every person will be able to participate without being shamed or stretched beyond their limits, yet can also each be proudly invested in their own and the community’s liberation.

Shabbat Shalom (and Hodesh tov)!

Rabbi Gail Labovitz, PhD, is Professor of Rabbinic Literature and former Chair of the Department of Rabbinics for the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. She also enjoys serving as the Ziegler School’s faculty advisor for “InterSem,” a dialogue program for students training for religious leadership at Jewish and Christian seminaries around the Los Angeles area. Dr. Labovitz formerly taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) and the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York. Prior to joining the faculty at AJU, Dr. Labovitz worked as the Senior Research Analyst in Judaism for the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project at Brandeis University, and as the Coordinator for the Jewish Women’s Research Group, a project of the Women’s Studies Program at JTS. Rabbi Labovitz is also preparing a teshuva (rabbinic responsum) for consideration by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly on whether a person who is unable to fast for medical reasons may nonetheless serve as a leader of communal prayer on Yom Kippur.



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