

Parshas Tazria - Knowing a Man's Place

The *Midrash (Rabbah Tazria)* makes an interesting observation about the sequence of the laws of impurity first of animals which die and then the impurity caused by human birth. The *Midrash* says that if man is worthy, he is told that he precedes and supersedes all of creation. If man is unworthy, he is told that the animals precede him, even the little worms. This seems like a harsh statement but upon further reflection it is actually very ennobling of man and his physical existence. An additional thought to ponder is the *Baal HaTurim's* (15th century *Chumash* commentator and codifier of Jewish *Halacha*) comment that the seven days of impurity experienced by the mother who gave birth correspond with the seven days of mourning during the *Shiva* period. How is one to understand this juxtaposition?

It is possible to understand these comments as follows. The *Torah's* concept of human existence is that our real being is the eternal soul. The physical body is a mere לבוש - garment which is worn by the soul during its allotted period in this world. When the divine soul is enrobed in a body at the time of birth, there is potential for great things to happen. If this baby grows to use his physical existence to accumulate spiritual wealth in this world by engaging in *Torah* and *Mitzvot* and to sublimate the physical to the spiritual, it is a wonderful opportunity and a cause to celebrate. However, there is also great potential for destruction and loss. If the soul becomes seduced by the physical world and fails to elevate the mundane, then it will get dragged down and be sullied by its short passage through this world.

This explains the cause for טומאה - impurity at the time of birth. It is a message of caution; you have entered a world fraught with a real danger to become impure. This will help the child and his parents understand the need for proper education and moral growth to prevent this calamity from happening.

Conversely, when the soul departs the body at the end of its sojourn in this world, there is cause to feel sorrow and pain. The relatives mourn the loss of a dear one, but we also mourn the loss of potential. As long as the soul had its earthly vestments, it had the ability to advance spiritually. Now that has ended and the body is no longer an important part of existence:

וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעֶפְרָר עַל-הָאָרֶץ כְּשֶׁהָיָה וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב אֶל-הָאֱלֹקִים אֲשֶׁר נָתַנָּה

And the dust shall return to the earth as it was (originally) and spirit will return onto G-D who gave it.

This is a fundamental understanding of life which is the underpinning of a life of faith. We need to express it to ourselves and to our children and live in that belief in order to succeed in our mission as *Torah* true Jews.