



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, EMERITUS

My Earliest Memory

Have you ever been asked the question, “What is your earliest memory?”

I have been asked that question many times. There was a time, long ago, when I was a graduate student in psychology, when that question was posed. The answer was considered very revealing of the respondent’s deeper psyche.

Such exceptionally early memories were known in psychoanalytic circles as “screen memories” and were considered quite significant diagnostically. The scientific significance of such memories is now considered to have no basis, but they are certainly interesting and make for great conversation.

Considering the question posed, I had a clear image of my first memory. I was standing outside a brick building, looking up at my father, may he rest in peace, surrounded by

a small crowd of other men. Everyone was looking at the moon.

This may have been my first experience, at age three or four, of *Kiddush Levana*, the monthly ceremony during which the congregation exits the synagogue and acknowledges the first appearance of the new moon.

I have another memory of the religious significance of this ceremony. I remember being told that the Hebrew word for “month” is “*chodesh*” and the Hebrew word for “new” is “*chadash*.” It was then that I learned of the significance of the new moon which commences a new month, and became aware for the first time that the Jewish people follow the lunar, not solar, calendar.

The theme of newness and the constant potential for renewal is a central theme this time of year. It is also the central theme in the Jewish calendar, and, one might say, in Jewish tradition in general. The symbolism of the moon constantly renewing itself is coupled this week with the symbolism of springtime and nature’s renewal.

Pesach has a myriad of symbolic meanings, one of which is the perennial opportunity for personal and national rejuvenation.

When I focus on my earliest memory with extra effort, I remember what the men who surrounded me under that moon so long ago were saying to each other. Each man addressed three others with the traditional Jewish greeting, “*Shalom aleichem*.” I remember being puzzled

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by why Daddy was greeting friends that he saw daily with this special welcome, generally reserved for those whom one hadn't seen in a while.

I didn't ask him about it then; after all, it was still the era when "children were to be seen and not heard". But I have since answered the question for myself, and have explained it to my children and to my students as follows:

"The new moon is a symbol for renewal. It is a time for each of us personally to begin again, to forget past mistakes, to 'turn over a new leaf'. It is also a time for us to renew and recharge our relationship with others. It is a time to begin a new slate, to forgive each other, and to appreciate each other anew. Hence, we greet at least three friends, even old friends, with a 'Shalom aleichem,' as if they were newcomers in our lives."

This week's Torah portion of Tazria begins, "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be unclean seven days...and on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.'" (Leviticus 12:1-3) The opening theme this week is also one of a new beginning, of the birth of a new baby. It is a time for the celebration of the entry of a new member into the Jewish people.

It is at this point that you, dear reader, might well ask, "If we are celebrating not just newness in general, but the arrival of a new human being into this world and of a new member of the Jewish faith, then why does the mother enter the realm of *tumah*, ritual uncleanness? Should she not, rather, enter the realm of *kedushah v'taharah*, sanctity and cleanness?"

I found a most thought-provoking answer

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to this oft-asked question recorded in the name of that most profound of the Chassidic masters, Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk. He cites the passage in the Talmud which states that the "keys of childbirth" are kept by the Almighty Himself. It is He who presides, as it were, over "labor and delivery." Once the baby is born, His Presence departs as well. Just as when the soul of man departs, *tumah* descends, so too when the Divine Spirit departs, *tumah* ensues.

The Kotzker once again teaches a very deep, albeit existentially pessimistic, lesson. Perhaps one must be Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk to truly understand why he forces us to face

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& family on her **102nd Birthday!**

darkness even at the moment of joyous celebration of birth.

For most of us, on the other hand, this week's lesson is of light, and not of darkness. It is an occasion to contemplate all that is new in our natural and interpersonal environments, especially at this time of year. It is an opportunity to seize the moment by taking advantage of the constantly available potential for renewal of ourselves and of our friendships and relationships.

Is this just a Jewish message? Of course not. It is a message for all of humanity. And it is so well expressed by the famous adventurer and explorer of the sea, Jacques-Yves Cousteau, in his book *The Silent World*, when he writes:

“Sometimes we are lucky enough to know that our lives have been changed, to discard the old, embrace the new, and run headlong down an immutable course. It happened to me at Le Mourillon on that summer's day, when my eyes were opened to the sea.”

This Shabbat, may our eyes open to a different kind of sea. May we embrace the new and run, headlong and happy, down a different and better course. ■

רפואה שלמה

Yosef Ezriel ben Chaya Michal
Chana bat Bruriah

Ben Zion Simcha Mendel Ben Chana Rachel
Feyge Sara bas Chaya Peshe
Nechama Charna bat Feigel

Leah Naomi bat Tova
Pesach ben Sarah Frieda

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