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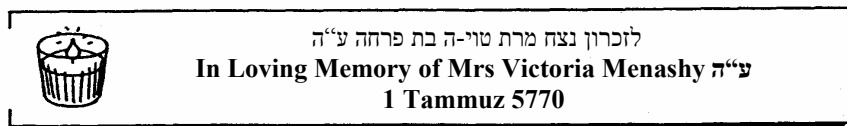
### MAKING THE FIRST STEP

**J**EWISH SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS COMPARE THE BOND OF EACH individual to the Divine with the intimate relationship of marriage. King Solomon's famous Song of Songs focuses on this theme: the King and the beautiful Shulamith represent G-d and the Jewish people. Some interpretations of the beginning of our Sedra<sup>1</sup> follow the same approach.

The closeness of husband and wife can be expressed in many ways during their day to day behaviour: concern, considerateness, sharing, affection, love. At any given moment, the initiative in maintaining these bonds may come from the husband, or it may come from the wife. Both modes are necessary: marriage is an interactive relationship.

The Sedra begins by describing the wife as the initiator, in some sense. The usual English translation states: "When a woman conceives and gives birth to a son..." The Torah text has emphasised the initiative not of the man, but of the woman.

The context is Jewish law relating to childbirth. Yet these words also concern the relationship between the Jewish people and G-d.



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In this relationship, the initiative might come from G-d. An example of this is the forthcoming Pesach festival. The Jewish people were immersed in the suffering of slavery. They had forgotten about G-d and about being the descendants of Abraham. So G-d took the initiative and sent Moses to redeem them.

Then the Jewish people had to make serious steps themselves in order to prepare for the Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. The original initiative had been from G-d to the people; in response the people now had to move towards G-d. The Sages tell us this response took place in the period between Pesach, when they left Egypt, and Shavuot seven weeks later, when they received the Torah.

Even so, later on the Jews were fickle; they complained easily, made the Golden Calf, and wept at the report of the Spies. This may all be due to the fact that the original initiative came not from the Jewish people, but from G-d. He redeemed them from Egypt, but their redemption was eventually followed by a further exile.

In the case of an individual today, the initiative coming 'from G-d' might be the fact that the person's environment - upbringing, or community - prompts him or her to keep Jewish law and teaching. This in itself is not enough. It needs to be matched by the person acting as an individual, making their own personal move forward. This is the message of our Sedra. The initiative is described as coming first from the woman, symbolising the Jewish people and the individual. As a result, the woman "gives birth" in a healthy way, establishing a strong and real bond with the Divine.

Whether as individuals or as the Jewish people together, it is up to us to make the first move. Whatever one's upbringing or immediate environment, when a person makes an advance - however small - in keeping Jewish law or studying Torah, he or she is initiating a more intimate relationship with G-d. Ultimately, because we ourselves take the initiative, like the woman in the Sedra, the result will be the healthy 'birth' of the Redemption<sup>2</sup>.

1.

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***SPONSORED BY DR REUVEN JOEL***

Leviticus chs.12-13. See the commentary of the Or HaChaim to 12:2. 2. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 1, pp.236-8.



SEDRA TAZRIA

**THE NEW ARRIVAL**

Rafi was in the midst of a wonderful dream, involving peppermints and chocolate, when he was awakened by his brother Yoni shaking him. "Wake up, Rafi," he was saying urgently, "Daddy and Mummy are both not here, and Mrs Samuel from next door is sleeping downstairs, and it's only 6.30 in the morning!"

This certainly sounded very unusual and Rafi got out of bed. As the boys crept down the stairs they heard a noise at the door, and their father came into the house, looking tired but happy.

"Mazel Tov, Rafi and Yoni!" he said with a big smile. "You have a new little sister!"

Yoni was the first to react. "Can we see her? Now? Oh, I can't wait to tell all my friends!"

"Me too! What are we going to call her?" Rafi added excitedly.

Their father told them that they would go to visit their mother and the new baby after school, and that the baby would receive her name at the Torah reading on Shabbat morning.

Rafi was so excited he could hardly sit still that whole day. In fact this was not so unusual, there was always a reason not to sit still, but this time it was his baby sister.

When his Hebrew teacher, Mr Waldman, came in Rafi told him that his mother had just had a baby.

Mr Waldman said "That's wonderful, Rafi, and I think you will pay special attention to my lesson today since I was planning to teach you Sedra Tazria, which, at the very beginning, tells us about what happens when a Jewish child is born. In the time of the Temple, when somebody had a baby, the mother would bring a special offering to the Temple in Jerusalem to say thank you for this marvellous gift of a child which G-d has given her."

Later on that afternoon, Rafi and Yoni were sitting atop their mother's bed in the hospital, admiring the minute bundle of pink cheeks, blue eyes, and what seemed to be a huge amount of dark hair for so small a person.

"Mummy, guess what!" Rafi exclaimed. "My teacher told me that if we were living in the time of the Temple, you would bring an offering to G-d to thank Him for giving you a baby."

His mother smiled at him. "Well, until the Temple is rebuilt, which will please G-d be very soon, we can thank G-d in other ways for this beautiful little baby."

Their father said "I know, we can give some money to charity in honour of our new little girl. How about that?"

"That's an excellent idea," Rafi said approvingly. "And I can give something from my pocket money too!"

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