

mostly Reconstructionist- and Conservative-raised people toward a “new *halakhah*.” Even as the orthodox decry “women’s lib,” the orthodox community is taking much more seriously than before the religious education of orthodox women. The next generation will thus have to deal with the consequences of the deep involvement of a number of intelligent, committed women to a tradition which ignores their intelligence and rejects their commitment. Reform women are finally becoming healthily skeptical of the token equality they have been tolerantly allowed, and demanding that the movement make good on its liberal promises. The seekers of a new *halakhah* regard the position of women as paramount on their agenda. There are groups all over the country, both mixed and all-women, who are trying to create new rituals to meet the needs of women and the need of the community to encounter women and women’s realities.

What needs to be found, somehow, through this multitude of approaches, is an understanding of revelation and the community’s interpretation of revelation that will recognize the existence of women as subjects (not only objects) of religious life, and will deal with the moral and ritual problems of women as women, not merely as creatures who inhabit and affect the world of men. We are told that the Torah was given on Sinai in all seventy-two of the known languages of man, and that the oral Torah was given at the same time, all to be explored from time to time in succeeding centuries. We have not yet explored, nor fully opened ourselves to hear, the Torah in the seventy-third language, the language in which it is no more exceptional to be feminine than masculine, and in which every woman is addressed as “thou.”

*(Much creative activity today focuses on new rituals to mark important times of transition in the lives of women. We present here two suggestions for such rites of passage, along with an evaluation of some of the rituals that have been created. An article by Michael Chernick, solicited for this discussion, outlining some of the halachic considerations in creating new rituals, will appear in our next issue.—E.B.B.)*

## Childbirth, a covenantal experience

Martin L. Gordon

Fresh from the overwhelming experience at first hand (a la Lamaze) of the birth of our son, I am struck by

the covenantal dimensions of the mother’s role in the process of parturition. The covenantal experience is a commitment to life, to the continuity of the Jewish future, at sacrificial cost. If the blood drawn at circumcision constitutes *brit* (covenant) for the male, centered as it is about the seminal organ which generates life’s *potential*, then the throes of delivery — the *actualizing* moment — may very well represent the occasion of *brit* for the female, when the mother, following the period of gestation, heroically thrusts the fetus she has nurtured into life.

The biblical metaphor of “birth pangs” has profound theological implications. In prophetic figure (see Isaiah 66:7-9), the tension of labor connotes Zion’s painful but determined anticipation of its imminent salvation. Similarly, the proverbial *aggadic* reference to *hevlē mashiāh* (birth pangs of the Messiah). If the birth process is charged, then, with such dynamic import as to symbolize the emergence of Israel’s collective redemption, then the experience of the individual mother must undoubtedly be a redemptive drama in miniature.

### Birth, covenant, redemption

Strikingly, the very biblical passage, which articulates the covenantal theme (the sacrificial motif) during the *Brit Milah* (circumcision) ceremonial, refers in the immediate context from which it is drawn to the travail of the birth process. Specifically, Ezekiel 16 describes the pathos of Israel’s suffering at the historic moment of its genesis as a people, when it lay as an abandoned newborn, untended, unwashed, sullied by the blood of its birth amid the callous Egyptian enslavement. Observing Israel’s perseverance, God is said to declare: “In thy blood thou shalt live . . . in thy blood thou shalt live” (verse 6). Thus the sacrificial significance of *dam ledah* is confirmed along with that of *dam milah*.

Indeed, the *aggadic* tradition, in the context of the above prophetic chapter, develops the notion that it was the faith of Jewish womanhood (*nashim tzidkaniyyot*) that entitled Israel to its redemption from Egypt. As a talmudic passage portrays it (*Sotah* 11b), the women, in the face of Pharaoh’s decree against the newborn (as well as their husbands’ accompanying sense of despair, according to an adjoining passage), insisted on conceiving and bearing children. When the moment of birth would approach, they would escape to the orchards, as the *aggadah* romantically amplifies the theme, where they would deliver their babes under the protective shade of the apple tree. (The apple orchard, in fact, becomes symbolic,

in kabbalist terminology, of *Shekhinah*, the maternal *sefirah*.)

For the male, then, whose role it is to generate life's potential, the covenantal moment is in infancy, when he himself is but a tender, potential existent. For the female, on the other hand, whose role it is to nourish the seed of life to its fruition within her womb, the covenantal moment is at delivery, when in her full vitality as a mature woman she commits the strength of her entire being to transmitting the gift of life to her offspring.

## When a Jewish woman comes of age

Nina Freedman

When our eldest son became Bar Mitzvah, the nagging feelings of inadequacy in regard to pertinent recognition for Jewish girls achieving puberty really became disturbing. Our son had entered Jewish adulthood with a clear sense that, in the community and within the family, he was viewed as a responsible and fully-contributing adult *male* in the mainstream of Judaism that goes back to Sinai. What would give a girl of twelve equivalent *Jewish* awareness in terms of her adult womanhood?

My first thoughts tended towards a home-oriented ceremony centered, as was our son's in the synagogue, around reading from some section of the *Tanach* and importantly the *Drasha*. I felt that the girl, whose image for her community and for her children in the future will be that of teacher should include a discourse on aspects of Judaism which would relate to her new status as a halachically responsible Jewess. For her, also, the stream of Judaism goes back to Sinai and will demand the utmost of which she is capable for the rest of her life.

The ceremony should reflect the uniqueness of women. But a ceremony marking a Jewish girl's emergence from childhood wounds and insults, rather than honors, if it embodies the concept that she has to be compared with a boy and his emergence into manhood. Such a ceremony should reflect her uniqueness as a woman and represent her position in the history and the future of her people.

The very first time that menstruation takes place is obviously very important to the development of a woman. Even though in theory the girl of 1976 knows what to expect, understands what is happening to her, and has no inhibitions on the subject - this is far from being true of every girl. For Jewish women,

the beginning of our physical creative potential is also roughly the time at which we achieve *halachic* maturity or legal responsibility. We achieve the potential to observe the *mitzvot* of Nidah, the laws of sexual relationships in marriage and their relation to the menstrual cycle. Since the days of the Gaonim, these laws have been considered unrelated to the unmarried Jewish woman. Before the mid-ninth century, however, it was perfectly permissible and customary for a girl to immerse herself in the *mikvah* upon reaching physical womanhood, even if she was not married. Since that time, the instruction in and observance of this body of law, so central to the life of the Jewish woman, has been postponed until the farthest end of adolescence and well beyond.

Adolescence is prolonged, Judaism becomes resented. There have been several consequences of this: Firstly, the onset of menstruation has initially no connection whatsoever with the fact of being Jewish, with Jewish female maturity. Secondly, there is a long span of years where, with a certain amount of justification, she often feels herself to be in limbo, as far as her specific Jewish responsibilities are concerned. At a time when society is generally regarding the home as an almost hostile, repressive environment for the woman, the Jewish girl and woman lives in a tradition which emphasizes and values her role in the home.

This disparity in outlook is difficult enough for many Jewish women who are already assuming primary religious and educational responsibility for the home and can relate to the sexual laws of Judaism within marriage. For the young girl of twelve, however, the message comes across with apparent clarity and a great deal of indifference: *nothing for you, but learning how to do and how to be in the years to come, unless you want to imitate your brother. Nothing for you specifically. Furthermore, your eventual, lifelong task will be unsatisfying and second-class.* This message unfortunately engenders understandable resentment towards Judaism.

**Tevilah** – the ceremony to mark Jewish womanhood. One potential *halachic* key, one tremendous consciousness-raiser for the Jewish girl who cannot yet enjoy the marriage relationship, but does experience physical womanhood, is the concept of *Tevilah*, ritual immersion in relation to her menstrual cycle. One of the chief targets of women's resentment against *halachah* is the body of Jewish sex laws which dictate separation of husband and wife for a period of time before, during, and after menstruation, as well as ritual immersion prior to the resumption of physical love. Indeed, these laws are not so much resented as