

## **Childbirth and new beginnings**

We are celebrating many things this week – the birth of Jasmine, the new month of Nissan and the count-down to Pesach! Spring is well underway! The days are getting warmer and longer! Although we mark the beginning of every month, there is something particularly significant about this one – it is THE month....the month in which we commemorate the Exodus from Egypt, an event so significant we recall it every day in our daily prayers and we have three readings – the weekly one, one for Rosh Chodesh and a special one for the month of Nissan.

We are not only preparing the ground for our landmark festival, but we are also marking the beginning of a new year. The exodus from Egypt is so revolutionary, so fundamental to what it means to be Jewish, that it changes the calendar, so that the year starts in the spring. The new year of Rosh Hashanah is a more recent innovation – the Torah talks about a holiday that takes place in the seventh month, but it's not a new year. The Biblical new year is in the spring.

And these two new years mark different ways of dividing the year. Rosh Hashanah is also a real beginning – in particular it's the beginning of the school year, after the long summer holiday, when the harvest has been gathered in. The old year's

harvest has been gathered in and so we begin again. But this month, Nisan, heralds in the spring – time for us to come out of our hibernation, go for walks, smell the flowers. Spiritually we come out of our own individual space, the inner meditations of winter, and get ready to embrace the birth of our own people, in community, and to act that out on seder night.

Birth, whether the birth of a baby, the birth of a people, or a new beginning of any kind isn't always easy. Change isn't always easy, not even positive change. I had a look at the stress index recently and was surprised to see marriage scoring almost as highly as divorce. The Exodus is preceded by this hugely traumatic 10<sup>th</sup> plague, the death of the firstborn, which I think *must* have affected the Israelites as well as the Egyptians. The Egyptians couldn't all have been brutal overseers. A mixed multitude went up from Egypt. Some of the Israelites may have married into Egyptian households; certainly the traditional reading implies that non-Israelites left with them. To leave a place you are familiar with, but which is enslaving you, to a place of freedom and self-determination, but which leaves you in the wilderness – that is the call of Shabbat HaChodesh, the call for change when the April rains fall and the air gets warmer.

So this week is all about newness and fresh beginnings and in our weekly Torah portion we hear about the biggest life change

of all – childbirth. Women are instructed to undergo a period of separation after childbirth before re-entering the Sanctuary. They are “tamei” – a state of ritual impurity incurred in a number of ways, but I find it interesting that the categories include both childbirth, and contact with the dead; brushes with the boundaries of life and death. After a period of time she enters a state of tahara, usually translated as purification, at the end of which she offers a sacrifice and can then re-enter the community. This whole period of separation after childbirth is 40 days for a boy, and 80 days if she has a girl. So what’s going on?

There is so little about real women’s lives in the Torah, that when it does talk directly about childbirth – not about the birth of a significant character, but about the women who has just given birth, it’s worth a closer look. Birth was seen as miraculous but also awe-inspiring and powerful. There is a theory that in the ancient world certain places and people carried a kind of electrical charge and had to be approached cautiously if at all. The mysterious and divine power of birth was something to be cautious and careful of.

Bringing a new life into the world is indeed an awesome business, a brush with the divine and of course, until very recently, and still in many parts of the world, a life-threatening

business. Birthing touches the boundaries of life and death – it is powerful, it is life-changing and earth-shattering. That is what I think is the real meaning of *tamei*, means here – an acknowledgement of this other-worldliness. A sense that after going through an extraordinary, life-changing event, it takes time to settle, for the tremors to sop.

And why does a woman spend twice as long in this state if she has a girl as if she has a boy? Traditional commentators have assumed that the birth of a girl who will one day give birth herself, creates a double impurity. But there are other readings.

Dr Beth Alpert Nakhai, Professor in Judaic Studies in Arizona, has pointed out that life for baby girls was more dangerous than for boys. Girls were sometimes thought of as expendable. Perhaps the girls were allowed to stay in their mothers' protective care for a longer period of time to ensure they were cared for.

And I wonder too if there is a teaching for us about the length of time that is needed to go back to one's normal routine after having a baby – or indeed after any huge life change. It takes a while to readjust. In many cultures there is a tradition of the mother staying at home for six weeks to be looked after. Now I know some people are back at their desks within days. But the

recovery after a caesarean birth is about six weeks – or about 40 days. You have your post-natal health check at the doctors six to eight weeks after birth – in fact the period of *tamei* roughly corresponds to what is now called the post-partum period, a time when the body begins to heal. So maybe we can learn from this week's Torah portion that families, not just mothers, need time after the birth, perhaps after any major life event, to readjust.

This is a good time of year to think about birth. Nature is coming to life again. The lambing season will soon be upon us. The birth of our people, which took place during the lambing season and which we celebrate as a spring festival, is two weeks away. And as if by a miracle, we are today celebrating a new life in our community.