

Rosh Hashanah

SUCKLING CHILDREN

Genesis 21:7-8

And Sarah said: Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah should give children suck? For I have borne him a son in his old age. And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned.

Mishnah Ketubot 5:5

These are the tasks that a wife performs for her husband: she grinds grain, bakes, launders, cooks, nurses her child, makes his bed, and works with wool. If she brought one maidservant with her into the marriage, she does not grind, bake, nor launder. If she brought two, she does not cook nor nurse her child. If she brought three, she does not make his bed nor work with wool. If she brought four maidservants with her into the marriage, she sits in a chair at her leisure.

Bavli Ketubot 60a

There was a certain divorced woman who came before Shmuel because she did not want to nurse her child anymore.... Shmuel said: "Go and test her."

Shmuel went and placed her in a row of women, and took her son and passed him before them. When the child reached her, he looked up at her face. She hid her eyes from him.

Shmuel said to her: "Raise your eyes, stand up, and take your child."

Discussion Questions

1. This weaning feast of Isaac's is the only weaning celebration recorded in the entire Bible. Do you know of weaning feasts current in Jewish or other cultures that might shed light on this ritual? If you were to create such a celebration today, what would it entail?

What connection does the developmental step of weaning have with spiritual progress as measured on Rosh Hashanah?

2. According to the mishnah, a wife's housework, which includes nursing, has monetary value. How does the Jewish concept of marriage—based on responsibilities agreed to before the contract is entered into—differ from other modern conceptions of marriage? How does this mirror our relationship with God?

3. The divorced woman in the Gemara passage does not want to nurse her child. Since she is no longer married, she does not have to perform this marital obligation. However, the sages (correctly) believed that once a child became used to the experience and taste of his mother's milk, he would not nurse from another woman. So Shmuel devises an experiment to see if the child already recognizes its mother. The child does and so, even though divorced and not obligated by her wedding contract to nurse the child, she must still do so to save the child's life. How is this metaphor of the woman unwilling to nurse her own child related to the ways we take responsibility for things, or not? Does it connect to how we evaluate ourselves at this time of "an accounting of the soul?"

Yom Kippur

LIKE THE ANGELS

Leviticus 16:2

And God said to Moses: Speak to your brother Aaron and tell him that at no time should he enter the holy area behind the curtain before the covering on the ark or he will die because I, God, appear in the smoke above the covering on the ark.

Mishnah 8:1

On the Day of Atonement it is forbidden to eat, drink, wash, anoint, put on sandals and have sexual intercourse.

Rabbi Eliezer said: But a king and a bride may wash their faces and a woman in childbirth may wear sandals.

The sages, however, prohibited such activities on the Day of Atonement.

Bavli Menachot 110a

“This is an ordinance for ever to Israel...” (II Chronicles 2:3). This refers to the altar built in Heaven upon which Michael, the Great Prince of Angels, stands and offers offerings.

Discussion Questions

1. On the Day of Atonement a man with perfect lineage, in perfect clothes, in a state of perfect ritual purity, *still* had to be very careful not to come too close to God’s presence. Have you ever come very close to God’s presence? Have you ever been in a position where you feared for your life? In your experience—or imagination—are the feelings the same, or different?

2. On Yom Kippur we are to try to be as much like the angels as possible. One way we accomplish this is by becoming more like them physically. As we saw in Kedoshim (page 60), the angels don’t eat or drink. How else could you make yourself feel more like an angel on Yom Kippur?

3. The sages believed that everything on earth had a heavenly corollary. So when the priests offered up the sacrifices on earth, Michael offered them on high, as well. In what other ways do Yom Kippur services evoke a heavenly counterpart? Will you behave differently during services knowing that you have a counterpart in heaven?