Identity, Royalty and Contentment: Breastfeeding in Tanakh

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Identity, Royalty and Contentment: Breastfeeding in Tanakh[1]

by Rabbi Hayyim Angel

The Bible relates that four of our greatest figures were breastfed: Isaac, Rebekah, Moses, and Samuel. In this essay, we shall explore these narratives as well as several poetic references to breastfeeding. Tanakh attributes meaning to breastfeeding that significantly transcends mere physical nourishment. There is a stress on nurturing religious identity, conferral of elevated status, and ultimate contentment through breastfeeding.

Narrative References to Breastfeeding

Isaac

When Abraham and Sarah miraculously become parents, Abraham circumcises Isaac as God had commanded him. The Torah shifts attention to Sarah's nursing Isaac, and to the feast Abraham held when Isaac was weaned:[2]

> Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of Isaac. And when his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God had commanded him. Now Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” And she added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children! Yet I have borne a son in his old age.” The child grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. (Genesis 21:3–8)

Leon Kass[3] observes that male circumcision was widely practiced in the ancient world as a puberty ritual.[4] It was a sign of sexual potency and an initiation into the society of males, ending a boy’s primary attachment to his mother and household, the society of women and children. The Torah radically transforms the ritual of circumcision into a father’s religious duty toward his son. Circumcision in the Torah celebrates not male potency but rather procreation and perpetuation. Immediately after the birth of a son, a father must begin transmission of the covenant.

More than women, males need extra inducement to take a parental role. They need to be acculturated to become interested in child rearing. Virility and potency are far less important to the Torah than decency, righteousness, and holiness. The society of males must be sanctified from birth. It is defined by those who remember God rather than those who fight, rule, and make their name great. Circumcision also profoundly affects the mother of the child, as it reminds her that her son is not fully hers. God therefore renames Sarai to Sarah at the time of God’s command of circumcision to Abraham.

One underdeveloped area in Kass’ analysis is his treatment of motherhood. For Kass, women need far less religious guidance than men in order to stand properly before God. Once they overcome the potential arrogance of considering their children as their possessions, they are well on their way to living a life of holiness. In contrast, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik offers a more nuanced view of motherhood through his typology of Natural people and Redeemed people. In the natural community, a father’s role is minimal, whereas motherhood is central to a woman’s life. Similar to Kass, Rabbi Soloveitchik outlines ways the Torah teaches men they must educate their children in the covenant to be worthy of a redeemed fatherhood.

However, Rabbi Soloveitchik also develops the central role of the mother in partnering with her husband in the spiritual upbringing of her children.[5] God names Abraham—and not Adam—*av hamon goyim*, a father of many nations, because redeemed fatherhood begins with a father’s commitment to his

children's religious education: "Man's involvement with God is only realizable if he is ready to commit his offspring to God by imbuing them with Torah knowledge and Torah ideals."[6] Eve received her new name because she was *em kol hai*, the mother of all living beings, since natural motherhood involves true sacrifice. However, Sarai was renamed Sarah in the same discussion as Abraham's name change in the context of circumcision, since she did more than raise biological progeny—she partnered with Abraham in transmitting the covenant:

> In the natural community, the woman is involved in her motherhood-destiny; father is a distant figure who stands on the periphery. In the covenantal community, father moves to the center where mother has been all along, and both together take on a new commitment, universal in substance: to teach, to train the child to hear the faint echoes which keep on tapping at our gates and which disturb the complacent, comfortable, gracious society.[7]

Given the Torah's highlighting of both Isaac's circumcision and breastfeeding-weaning, we may suggest that the religious partnership between father and mother described by Rabbi Soloveitchik is explicit in the text. Both elements establish the religious identity of the child.

Rebekah

The Torah notes that Rebekah also was breastfed. When Rebekah agrees to accompany Abraham's servant back to the Land of Canaan to marry Isaac, she is joined by her wet nurse:

> So they sent off their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. (Genesis 24:59)

We learn of this nurse's name—Deborah—only when she dies:

> Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and was buried under the oak below Bethel; so it was named Allon-bacuth. (Genesis 35:8)

The Torah provides no further details as to why Deborah should have been mentioned at all. Yet, she matters enough to warrant biblical notice. Addressing these anomalous references, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik speculates that Deborah must have been a singular positive influence on Rebekah, who grew up in the pagan household of Bethuel and alongside her wicked brother Laban. Perhaps Deborah's religious vision steered Rebekah onto the exceptional path of hospitality and righteousness that became hallmarks of the matriarch's life.[8]

Moses

The Torah relates that the greatest prophet, Moses, was breastfed by his mother Jochebed:

> Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter answered, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. (Exodus 2:7–9)

At one level, the narrative highlights the cleverness of Moses' sister,[9] who looked after her brother and then brilliantly was able to arrange for Moses' own mother to nurse him and even receive payment for her services.

However, there appears to be greater significance to highlighting that Moses was breastfed by his own mother, rather than by an Egyptian or by a slave of Pharaoh's daughter. One talmudic passage surmises that God wanted to shield Moses from nursing from a pagan woman. The infant who would grow to become the greatest prophet should be breastfed by an Israelite:

> Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call thee a nurse of the Hebrew women? Why just "of the Hebrew women"?—It teaches that they handed Moses about to all the Egyptian women but he would not suck. He said: Shall a mouth which will speak with the Shekhinah suck what is unclean! (*Sotah* 12b)

A different Midrash (*Exodus Rabbah* 1:25) presents this view and also offers an alternative: Moses would become the greatest prophet, and God did not want the Egyptians to credit themselves for nursing him.

Common to both midrashic responses is the rabbinic assumption that breastfeeding helps form the identity and character of a child.[10]

Samuel

The prophet Samuel was breastfed by his mother Hannah. In this narrative, Hannah's maternal love shines forth and helps shape the exceptional personality of Samuel:

> Hannah conceived, and at the turn of the year bore a son. She named him Samuel, meaning, "I asked the Lord for him." And when the man Elkanah and all his household were going up to offer to the Lord the annual sacrifice and his votive sacrifice, Hannah did not go up. She said to her husband, "When the child is weaned, I will bring him. For when he has appeared before the Lord, he must remain there for good." Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Do as you think best. Stay home until you have weaned him. May the Lord fulfill His word." So the woman stayed home and nursed her son until she weaned him. When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with three bulls, one ephah of flour, and a jar of wine. And though the boy was still very young, she brought him to the House of the Lord at Shiloh. (I Samuel 1:20–24)

Hannah's commitment to nursing Samuel also results in the delayed fulfillment of her vow to dedicate her son to God.[11] Hannah's husband Elkanah supports Hannah's decision.

At one level, Hannah's breastfeeding provides necessary nourishment for her child that the High Priest Eli would be unable to replace. However, it also symbolizes her love, nurturing, and religious influence.

The text does not indicate Samuel's age when Hannah weaned him and brought him to Shiloh to serve in the Tabernacle under Eli's tutelage. Rabbinic sources discuss the age of weaning more broadly. *Tosefta Niddah* 2:2, quoted in *Ketubot* 60a, presents a debate. Rabbi Eliezer maintains that women breastfed for two years. Rabbi Joshua suggests that nursing could go up to four or five years. Mayer Gruber[12] observes that there is ancient Near Eastern evidence for weaning as late as 3, 7, 10, and even 15 years. Gruber links this survey to Samuel, as one must consider when he would be old enough to remain in Shiloh and serve God.

Regardless, Hannah's breastfeeding of Samuel plays a vital role in the narrative, and transcends mere nourishment in terms of Samuel's development into a leading prophet of Israel.

Poetic References to Breastfeeding

Cynthia Chapman[13] explores several poetic biblical references to breastfeeding. In Isaiah 60, the prophet envisions the rebuilding of the Temple and return of Israel's exiles. The prophet portrays redemption in royal terms, as kings and nations will bow to Israel. Israel then will suck the milk from the royalty of nations:

> Bowing before you, shall come the children of those who tormented you; prostrate at the soles of your feet shall be all those who reviled you; and you shall be called "City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel." Whereas you have been forsaken, rejected, with none passing through, I will make you a pride everlasting, a joy for age after age. You shall suck the milk of

> the nations, suckle at royal breasts. And you shall know that I the Lord am your Savior, I, The Mighty One of Jacob, am your Redeemer. (Isaiah 60:14–16)

Similarly, the prophet portrays Israel's redemption in terms of their being nurtured by foreign kings and queens:

> Kings shall tend your children, their queens shall serve you as nurses. They shall bow to you, face to the ground, and lick the dust of your feet. And you shall know that I am the Lord—those who trust in Me shall not be shamed. (Isaiah 49:23)

Chapman explains that the symbolic "breastfeeding" from foreign kings and queens confers royal status onto the people of Israel.

In Isaiah 66, the ingathered exiles will drink the milk of God and Jerusalem, who co-parent Israel in their rebirth to ethnic status and glory:

> Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her! Join in her jubilation, all you who mourned over her—That you may suck from her breast consolation to the full, that you may draw from her bosom glory to your delight. For thus said the Lord: I will extend to her prosperity like a stream, the wealth of nations like a wadi in flood; and you shall drink of it. You shall be carried on shoulders and dandled upon knees. As a mother comforts her son so I will comfort you; you shall find comfort in Jerusalem. (Isaiah 66:10–13)

Chapman concludes that breastfeeding confers identity and elevated status. She applies this thesis to explain why the Torah highlights Sarah's breastfeeding Isaac and Jochebed nursing Moses. In both instances, it would have been plausible for non-Israelites to nurse the infants, but the Torah stresses the full Israelite identity of these figures.

Chapman proposes further significance for Naomi's holding the baby Obed after Ruth and Boaz give birth to him:

> Naomi took the child and held it to her bosom. She became its foster mother (*omenet*), and the women neighbors gave him a name, saying, "A son is born to Naomi!" They named him Obed; he was the father of Jesse, father of David. (Ruth 4:16–17)

The Hebrew term *meneket*, nurse, is used exclusively with women, and refers to breastfeeding. *Omen-omenet* is less clear, since it is used both for men and women. The wet nurse of Mephibosheth (II Samuel 4:4) is the only other biblical occurrence aside from Naomi where *omenet* refers to a

woman. For a man, the term *omen* generally means “guardian” or “foster father” (II Kings 10:1; Esther 2:7, 20).

Whether Naomi literally or symbolically breastfeeds Obed, she confers support for Obed’s Judean identity since Ruth still is identified as a Moabite. This identity legitimizes Obed’s grandson, David.

Contentment and Security

In the course of expressing concern over God’s abandonment of Israel to its enemies, the psalmist in Psalm 22 draws consolation from God’s helping the nation in birth, and offering security at its mother’s breast:

> You drew me from the womb, made me secure at my mother’s breast. I became Your charge at birth; from my mother’s womb You have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help. (Psalm 22:10–12)

One of the most beautiful poetic references to breastfeeding is expressed by the psalmist of Psalm 131. He is able to ward off the natural human feelings of greed by developing a deep sense of being satisfied, like a weaned child with its mother:

> A song of ascents. Of David. O Lord, my heart is not proud nor my look haughty; I do not aspire to great things or to what is beyond me; but I have taught myself to be contented like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child am I in my mind. O Israel, wait for the Lord now and forever. (Psalm 131)

Breastfeeding becomes a symbol of the ultimate sense of security and contentment.

On the reverse side, Moses despairs when the people demand meat in the wilderness. He is unable to supply the malcontent people’s needs:

> And Moses said to the Lord, “Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me? Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse (*omen*) carries an infant,’ to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people, when they whine before me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me. If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!”

(Numbers 11:11–15)

Moses likens himself to a nurse (*omen*) who is unable to provide for an infant. Abarbanel explains that Moses feels like a man holding a crying infant who needs to be breastfed. Moses is paralyzed since of course he has no milk for his baby. So too he has no ability to provide meat for the complaining people.

Conclusion

Far beyond physical nourishment, breastfeeding highlights the mother's role in shaping a child's religious identity. Prophets and psalmists draw further inferences through poetic usage of the imagery to describe how breastfeeding confers identity and status onto a child. Finally, a religious relationship with God ideally is characterized by humility and contentment, paralleled to a weaned child with its mother.

Notes

[1] This article grew out of a program I organized through The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals on June 6, 2021. Dr. Deena Zimmerman spoke on the need to combine halakha, current scientific knowledge, and human sensitivity when addressing issues of breastfeeding (of course, the same combination of elements is required in all areas of Jewish Law). You may watch the program on our YouTube channel, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sWQJWg2hxo

[2] Rabbinic sources are aware of the longstanding practice to hold celebrations for circumcision, but not for the weaning of a child. Yet, Abraham is said to have held a feast for weaning, but not for Isaac's circumcision. Bridging the contemporary practice with the biblical text, *Midrash Psalms* 112 derives from our narrative that people hold feasts for circumcision! Hewing closer to the biblical text, Hizkuni remarks that it must have been customary to celebrate a child's weaning in that society. Malbim suggests further that Abraham did not hold a feast for Isaac's circumcision, since he was observing a private commandment from God. For the weaning, however, he could hold a public feast for his community.

[3] Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003), pp. 313–315.

[4] See Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), pp. 131–133.

[5] Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, ed. David Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: Toras HoRav Foundation-Ktav, 2000). See also Rabbi Soloveitchik, "A Tribute to the Rebbitzen of Talne," *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring 1978), pp. 73–83.

[6] *Family Redeemed*, p. 58.

[7] *Family Redeemed*, p. 114.

[8] Saul Weiss, *Insights of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: Discourses on Fundamental Issues in Judaism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), pp. 84–85. I am grateful to Rabbi Saul Zucker for calling this reference to my attention.

[9] Most commentators identify this unnamed sister with Miriam, Moses' only named sister through the rest of the Torah. However, Ibn Ezra maintains that Miriam actually was Moses' *younger* sister, based on the order of "Aaron, Moses, and Miriam their sister" in Numbers 26:59. Therefore, Ibn Ezra concludes that this "sister" is some other relative of Moses. The Hebrew term *ahot* in the Bible may refer to a kinswoman, rather than an actual sibling.

[10] Rashi (on 2:7) adopts the rationale of *Sotah* 12b. Alternatively, Hizkuni proposes that the Egyptians would have considered it beneath themselves to breastfeed an Israelite slave. Sforno submits that Pharaoh's daughter would have considered Israelite breast milk more suitable for an Israelite infant.

[11] Deuteronomy 23:22: "When you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not put off fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will require it of you, and you will have incurred guilt." Cf. Ecclesiastes 5:3.

[12] Mayer I. Gruber, "Breast-Feeding Practices in Biblical Israel and in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 19 (1989), pp. 61–83.

[13] Cynthia R. Chapman, "'Oh that you were like a brother to me, one who had nursed at my mother's breasts.' Breast Milk as Kinship-Forging Substance," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, 12:7 (2012), 42pp.