



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

BALEBOSTES

The beginning of Tazria focuses on women and childbirth. It raises again the question of the status of women in Judaism.

Are they mere baby-machines and kitchen hands, or people with dignity?

In the Megila, the king decrees at the end of chapter 1 that each man must be the ruler of his house: no wife may be a Vashti and defy his diktat. (The same idea comes in the song, "Master of the House", in "Les Miserables").

True, there was a time when homes were ruled by Dad the Dictator, but though Judaism certainly believes that a family needs a leader and places certain religious roles in the hands of the husband, the famous chapter 31 of Mishlei ("Eshet Chayil", "The Capable Woman") is closer to the Jewish way of thinking with its sense of partnership.

The "Baal HaBayit" (see Sh'mot 22:7; Shoftim 19:22) is certainly the Jewish hero, a good citizen who is good for his community. Even God is called the "Baal HaBayit" of the world (end of chapter 2 of Avot). But there is an

equivalent term for a woman - a "Baleboste" - and it is she who is the Jewish heroine.

The ethos and ethic of the family are her charge. Marriage, the home and family are central in Jewish life, but there is no reason why a woman cannot be a Baleboste even if she has no husband or children. The ideal is that the woman is neither an appendage of the man nor his rival, but a partner who works with him to create a sound society.

Today's world also sees growing opportunities for women's spirituality - and it's all to the good.

RITUAL IMPURITY

A person who was in a state of TUM'AH, ritual impurity, could not enter the Sanctuary.

Rambam thinks this was in order to evoke awe and reverence for the Sanctuary. One had to be in a fit state to come into the holy place.

Ramban had a different idea, that the human body was capable of a temporary negative experience.

In both cases a person could change his or her own situation for the better. The Jewish idea is therefore that nothing is permanent in the human situation. One does not have to accept things as they are, either in the world

or in one's own self.

As an optimistic religion, the Jewish belief is that one not only can look forward to the future but can work towards it.

-OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH