



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

בשביל החיים
Walking with Life

Edited By
Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson
and Deborah Silver

דרכיה דרכי נעם

BIRTH AND CONCEPTION

RABBI NINA BETH CARDIN

INTRODUCTION

Human fertility – the ability to bring forth life and sustain it – is so much more than a physiological trait handed down, conveniently, from generation to generation. It is so much more than a utilitarian, Darwinian blueprint hardwired into us for the mindless purpose of species perpetuation. It is the cornerstone upon which we build intimacy, pairing, family, neighborhood, community, peoplehood. It is, in its lived reality, an awesome blending of raw physicality with sublime spirituality, joining one of the most completely satisfying experiences of the body with one of the most completely satisfying experiences of the spirit. “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,”¹ is not so much a command, though it is read that way by our tradition. It is even more: a blessing.

Human DNA takes two to tangle. One could imagine a world where procreation happens by one alone. (We have such fertility here on earth, both asexual and autogamous fertility.) But luckily for us, human fertility requires pairing. Such pairing ideally yields not just a child, but the intimacy of a couple, a home and a family into which the child will be lovingly welcomed.

In early biblical narrative, fertility was the greatest blessing. When God called to Abra(ha)m to leave his homeland and go to that unnamed place somewhere, God enticed Abra(ha)m by saying: “I will make of you a great nation.” And, “I will give this land to your offspring.”² No man or family or people could be great without the blessing of children to extend their reach and carry on after them.

The problem was that at the time of this great wandering, Abraham had no children. Nor did he anticipate any, having reached advanced age, along with his barren wife. So, to hedge his bets (God had to earn Abraham’s trust, after all), Abraham took Lot, his nephew, along with him on the journey. If nothing else, Lot would serve as Abraham’s surrogate heir. But once in the promised land, Lot’s possessions and Abraham’s possessions became so great that they could no longer live on their shared slice of land. Lot left. And while Abraham easily absorbed the loss of flock and servants, he suffered mightily the loss of Lot. So the Torah rushes to console him. As soon as Lot leaves, God visits Abraham to assure him of the one thing he needs most: a child. “And the Lord said to Abram, Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west, for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring too can be counted.”³

Lot was the wrong heir, God tells Abraham. Do not despair. You will have a child, a rightful heir; indeed, a great people will emerge from you.

Our founding stories exalt the place of children in the life, dreams and role, of both men and women. For Abraham, as for many men, the lack of a child denied the would-be patriarch of his sense of a future as well as his sense of self. For Sarah, as for many women, it seems, childlessness denied her a meaningful present, her calling, as well as her sense of self. When Sarah finally accepts her personal infertility, she seeks to overcome it through the use of a surrogate.⁴ Her body’s failure would not be allowed to stand between her and her calling.

For many women in the Bible, their sexuality and (in) fertility are the primary ways they are remembered in our sacred narratives. When Rebecca leaves her parental home to join Isaac in Canaan, she is sent off with the following prayer: “O sister, may you grow into thousands of myriads.”⁵ When Rachel believes she is infertile, she accosts her husband, Jacob, saying, “Give me children or I shall die.”⁶

¹ Genesis 1:18

² Genesis 12:2,7

³ Genesis 13:11-13

⁴ Genesis 16:1-3

⁵ Genesis 24:60

⁶ Genesis 30:1



BIRTH AND CONCEPTION

At a time, and in a story, of nation-building, it is easily understood why fertility was so valued, so wrought with emotion, and so central to the sacred tale. And while the politics of fertility seem to be manifestly different today, the personal emotional valence is no less loaded.

BIRTH

Birth itself is a most awesome occasion. Sadly, though, we do not have narratives of births in the Bible. We do not know where birthing took place, who accompanied the woman, what prayers might have been said, what techniques might have been used, what amulets might have hung on the walls. We read in the Exodus story about two midwives (Hebrews? Egyptians?) who say their skills were unused, for the Hebrew women gave birth so quickly. Likewise the Talmud yields very little information on the experience of childbirth.

We do know that the birthing mother was bidden to take sacrifices to the Temple weeks after having given birth (a burnt offering and a sin offering - Leviticus 12). No reason is given for this – though it is curious that if she had a boy, she brings the sacrifice 40 days after the birth and if she had a girl, she brings the sacrifice 80 days after the birth. It is tempting to believe that the ability to give birth was seen as so awesome and fearsome, so God-like, that it required a sacrifice to restore our humility and ask God's forgiveness for our trespassing so close to the realm of divinity. Even more, if the one-who-can-birth brought forth another one-who-could-birth, a double sacrifice needed to be given.

But beginning in the Middle Ages, our knowledge expands. We have prayer books written for women (by women?) that devote pages and pages to the experience of conception, pregnancy and childbirth. While one strand of Jewish tradition suggests that women need not and did not pray regularly, another offers written testimony that women did in fact pray. Regularly. Sometimes their prayers incorporated the statutory daily prayers prescribed by the rabbis, into which women inserted their personal prayers. Sometimes their prayers stood independent of the codified liturgy. But the prayer books that we have, some printed and some copied by hand, include prayers of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. They speak of the desire to become pregnant, the woman's immersion in the *mikveh* on the eve of her sexual return to her husband, upon becoming pregnant, the first months of pregnancy, the gratitude of the seventh month, the ninth month and the worry during the long hours of labor.

One touching prayer, resonant even today, is to be recited when the mother nurses for the first time:

May it be your will, Lord my God and God of my forebears, that you provide me with nourishment for your humble creation, this tiny child, plenty of milk, as much as he needs.

Give me the disposition and inclination to find the time to nurse him patiently until he be satisfied.

Cause me to sleep lightly so that the moment he cries I will hear and respond.

Spare me the horror of accidentally smothering my child while I sleep, God forbid.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer.

This prayer speaks the mind of the new mother, acknowledging that caring for the child and caring for the mother are no longer synonymous. Time and attention must be carved out of the mother's busy schedule to feed and tend to the baby. This simple, moving prayer tells us a new life has arrived – with all the joys, demands and dangers that swirl around its vibrancy.



BIRTH AND CONCEPTION

CONCEPTION AND FERTILITY

Fertility in Judaism is a gift, not a given. Deuteronomy 7:12 -14 proclaims it as a core blessing from God in return for Israel's fidelity: "And if you obey these rules and observe them carefully... God will favor you and bless you and increase your numbers. ... God will bless the issue of your womb. ... There will be no barren man or woman among you." *Pirkei Avot* lists, "no woman ever miscarried" as one of the 10 miracles that happened at the Temple in Jerusalem.⁷ In Psalm 113, fertility is exalted as one of humanity's greatest joys and honors. "God sets the childless woman among her household as a happy mother of children."⁸ This is juxtaposed to the verse just before it, implying perhaps that a simple mother (and we may extrapolate to include father, as well) – who is blessed with children is as lofty, as valued, and as fulfilled as the "great men of God's people." Or perhaps today we can read it the other way around: that the great men of God's people are as fulfilled and wise as the happy mother surrounded by her children.

Rabbinic tradition tells us that the resolution to all infertility lies in the hands of God. "God possesses three keys that are not given over to any divine messenger: the key of rain, the key of the womb, and the key to resurrection."⁹ The secrets to human fertility, along with the blessings of nature's fertility, reside in the hands of God alone.

But what if infertility is not resolved? What if one does not have, and cannot find, a partner? (Gratefully, this need not be a cause of infertility today.) What if a couple cannot conceive? What if the woman cannot carry the pregnancy to term? What if all one knows is endless months of trying, miscarriage, stillbirth? Although the texts are sparse, our tradition is not silent on these issues.

The book of Samuel opens with a story of infertility: "There was a man from Ramathaim of the Zuphites in the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah. He had two wives, one named Hannah and the other Peninnah... the Lord had closed [Hannah's] womb."¹⁰

Hannah went to the local priest, Eli, at the shrine at Shiloh, to pray for a child: "O Lord of Hosts, if you will look upon the suffering of your maidservant and will remember me and not forget me, and if you give your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life. No razor shall ever touch his head."¹¹ Truly this is a sacrifice, to give up the child one longs for so much. But being called a mother, knowing you have been ushered into the sisterhood of motherhood was solace enough, even when you were, no doubt sadly, not able to mother your own child.

The rabbis read further into the story of Samuel: "As [Hannah] kept praying, Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved but her voice could not be heard."¹² Into that opening, a prayer without recorded words, the rabbis leapt. They crafted the prayer that Hannah could have said in those silent, seeking moments: "Master of the Universe, of all the parts of woman that you created, not one was created in vain. Our eyes were made for seeing; our ears for hearing; our nose for smelling; our mouth for speaking; our hands for working; our legs for walking and our breasts for nursing. But these breasts that you gave me, God – why do I not nurse from them? Give me a child, God, so that I might nurse."¹³

CONCLUSION

Hannah was blessed with a son. Yet, our rabbis understood that not all our prayers are answered, no matter how artful or heartfelt or just they may be. In the *Midrash Tanhuma*, the rabbis of old offer a story that seeks to comfort men who are not fathers:

⁷ *Mishnah Avot* 5:8

⁸ *Psalm* 113:9

⁹ *Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit* 2a

¹⁰ *I Samuel* 1-2

¹¹ *I Samuel* 1:11

¹² *I Samuel* 12-13

¹³ *Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot* 31b



BIRTH AND CONCEPTION

When a barren man left this world, he wept and wept. But God said to him, “Why do you weep? Is it because you did not bring forth children in the world below? Behold, you have left better fruit than children.” The man pauses and asks, “What fruit have I left?” God responds: “The fruit of Torah.”¹⁴

While this story of comfort is bound in a masculine frame, it speaks to our tradition’s awareness that not all infertility will be resolved, and that those without children may also serve as “parents.” Jews today are crafting rituals and traditions that offer contemporary responses to men and women who know the many losses that are found in the world of infertility. In turn, adoption, teaching, leadership, caring, *gemilut hesed*, are all increasingly defined as rich forms of fertility.

Human fertility is a private affair with public ramifications. In contrast to the (often over-stressed) American myth of autonomy and fierce individualism, Judaism makes powerful claims on individuals and families. Our children (as we ourselves) are not ours alone. Among everything else that lays claim to us, so the Jewish people claims us as their own. That is why, when our children are born, they are not only named (a private affair), but they are also entered into the covenant of the Jewish people (a public celebration). We ourselves along with our family and friends are not passive observers to this ritual. We have a role to play. We serve as deputies, agents, of the entire Jewish community, witnessing the naming and welcoming these children into our ancient covenant.

There is magic in these rituals. They not only provide a loving frame gifted to the children that guides them throughout their lives. They also affect us, the participants, the agents, the ones doing the welcoming. *Brisin* and *simhot bat* (son and daughter birth ceremonies) affect all of us who attend. In the best of times, they remind us of who we are, strengthening the values we hope will guide our daily steps. Or they may challenge us, awakening in us questions we put aside years ago.

For the parents, the ceremonies raise the questions of purpose in a brand new way, bringing to the fore existential questions of life that might have been filed away with the papers we wrote in our sophomore philosophy classes. To give birth to, adopt, raise or educate a child is to be forced to turn inward to our very core. Who we are, what we dream for these precious lives we give birth to, and how we can prepare them for the road ahead are questions that burn through us. Birth ceremonies return us to those matters that are most important in our lives. They are times for the whole family, and community, to be reborn, and renewed.

Parents and community bring forth and nourish new life; and the new life in turn gives birth to family and renews community.

¹⁴ *Midrash Tanhuma Noah*



BIRTH AND CONCEPTION – TEXT 1

תלמוד בבלי נדה לא:א

תנו רבנן: שלשה שותפין יש באדם, הקב"ה ואביו ואמו. אביו מזריע הלובן, שממנו עצמות וגידים וצפרנים, ומוח שבראשו, ולובן שבעין. אמו מזרעת אדם, שממנו עור ובשר ושערות, ושחור שבעין. והקב"ה נותן בו רוח ונשמה וקלסתר פנים, וראיית העין, ושמיעת האוזן, ודבור פה, והלוד רגלים, ובינה והשכל. וכיון שהגיע זמנו להפטר מן העולם - הקב"ה נוטל חלקו, וחלק אביו ואמו מניח לפניהם.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *NIDDAH* 31A

Our Rabbis taught: There are three partners in a person: the Holy Blessing One, the father and the mother. The father sows the white substance out of which are formed the child's bones, sinews, nails, the brain in its head and the whites of its eyes; the mother sows the red substance out of which is formed its skin, flesh, hair and the black of the eye; and the Holy One, blessed be God, gives the spirit and the soul, the beauty of the face, the seeing of the eyes, the hearing of the ear, the speech of the mouth and the walking of the feet, and insight, and understanding. When a person's time to depart from the world arrives, the Holy Blessing One takes away God's share and places those of the father and the mother before them.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Why do you think the Rabbis assigned the various aspects of the child in the way they did?
- Why do you think the image of 'sowing' is used of the parents, but not of the Holy One?
- What exactly happens when a person's time to depart from the world arrives?
- What lessons can we learn from this text about conception?



BIRTH AND CONCEPTION – TEXT 2

תלמוד בבלי יבמות סד:א

אמר רבי יצחק: יצחק אבינו עקור היה, שנאמר: (בראשית כ"ה) ויעתר יצחק לה' לנכח אשתו, על אשתו לא נאמר אלא לנכח, מלמד ששניהם עקורים היו. אי הכי, ויעתר לו - ויעתר להם מיבעי ליה. לפי שאינו דומה תפלת צדיק בן צדיק לתפלת צדיק בן רשע... א"ר יצחק: מפני מה היו אבותינו עקורים? מפני שהקב"ה מתאוה לתפלתו של צדיקים. א"ר יצחק: למה נמשלה תפלתו של צדיקים כעטר? מה עטר זה מהפך התבואה ממקום למקום, כך תפלתו של צדיקים מהפכת מדותיו של הקב"ה ממדת רגזנות למדת רחמנות.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *YEVAMOT* 64A

Rabbi Isaac said: Our father Isaac was barren, as it says: “And Isaac prayed [*va-ye'tar*] on behalf of his wife [because she was barren].”(Genesis 25:21) It says, “on behalf of” – which teaches us that they were both barren. But if so, shouldn't it say, “he prayed about them?” No: the way the text is written teaches us that the prayer of a righteous person who is the offspring of a righteous person is different from the prayer of a righteous person who is the offspring of a wicked person... Rabbi Isaac said: why were our ancestors barren? Because the Holy Blessing One desires the prayer of the righteous. Rabbi Isaac said: Why is the prayer of the righteous like a pitchfork [*eter*]? In the same way as a pitchfork turns produce over and over from place to place, the prayer of the righteous turns the qualities of the Holy Blessing One over and over, from the quality of irritation to the quality of compassion.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- When Rabbi Isaac asks “why were our ancestors barren?” which ancestors is he referring to?
- Why the reference to ‘the offspring of a righteous person/a wicked person?’
- In what other ways might prayer be like a pitchfork?
- How, according to Rabbi Isaac, does the Holy Blessing One relate to prayers about barrenness as opposed to other types of prayer?

¹ This is wordplay. The word for ‘prayed’ in the Biblical verse shares a root with the word for ‘pitchfork’.



BIRTH AND CONCEPTION – TEXT 3

בראשית רבה נח לח:יד

וַתְּהִי שָׂרָה עֲקָרָה אֵין לָהּ וְלֹדָּ: אָמַר ר' לֵוִי: בְּכָל מְקוֹם שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "אֵין לָהּ" הִנֵּה לָהּ: (בראשית כא א) "וְהָיָה כִּי יִפְקַד אֶת שָׂרָה" (ש"א א:ב) "וְהָיָה לְפָנֶיךָ יְלָדִים וְלִחְנָה אֵין יְלָדִים", וְהָיָה לָהּ: (שם ב,כא) "כִּי יִפְקַד אֶת חֲנָה וְתֵהָרֵת וְתִלְדֵּת שְׁלֹשָׁה בָנִים וְגו': (ירמיה ל, יז) "צִיּוֹן הִיא דֹרֵשׁ אֵין לָהּ", וְהָיָה לָהּ: (ישעיה נט,כ) "וַיָּבֵא לְצִיּוֹן גּוֹאֲלִים" (שם נד, א) רְנִי עֲקָרָה לֹא יִלְדָה פְּצָחִי רְנָה וְצַהֲלִי

MIDRASH RABBAH, NOAH 38:14

And Sarai was barren: she had no child [ein la valad]. Rabbi Levi said: anywhere it says 'she had no' [child] – she did [in the end]. "The Holy One remembered Sarah [as the Holy One had said, and the Holy One did to Sarah as the Holy One had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son...]" (Genesis 21:1-2) "Peninnah had children but Hannah had no children" (I Samuel 1:2) – she did: "The Holy One remembered Hannah and she conceived and bore three sons [and two daughters]." (I Samuel 2:21). "Zion has no one to care for her" (Jeremiah 30:17) – she did: "A redeemer is coming to Zion." (Isaiah 59:20); "Sing aloud, barren one who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud." (Isaiah 54:1)

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What conclusions does Rabbi Levi draw from the phrase 'ein la' in the various texts?
- Are the situations of Sarah, Hannah and Zion equivalent? Why/why not?
- What, if any, is the role of men in this Midrash?
- What does this text teach us about infertility?



BIRTH AND CONCEPTION – TEXT 4

מדרש רבה שיר השירים א:ג

בְּשִׁעָה שְׁעַמְדוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְקַבֵּל הַתּוֹרָה אָמַר לָהֶם אֲנִי נוֹתֵן לָכֶם תּוֹרָתִי הִבִּיאוּ לִי עֲרָבִים טוֹבִים שֶׁתִּשְׁמְרוּהָ וְאֶתְנַנֶּה לָכֶם, אָמְרוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ עוֹרָבִים אוֹתָנוּ, אָמַר לָהֶם הַקַּב"ה אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם יֵשׁ לִי עֲלֵיהֶם, אֲבָרְהֶם יֵשׁ לִי עֲלָיו שְׁאֲמַר (בראשית טו) בְּמָה אֲדַע, יִצְחָק יֵשׁ לִי עֲלָיו שְׁהִיָּה אוֹהֵב לְעִשָׂו וְאֲנִי שְׂנֵאתִיו שְׂנֵאָמַר (מלאכי א) וְאֶת עִשָׂו שְׂנֵאתִי, יַעֲקֹב שְׁאֲמַר (ישעיה מ) נִסְתָּרָה דַרְכֵי מֶה', אֶלֶּא הִבִּיאוּ לִי עֲרָבִים טוֹבִים וְאֲנִי נוֹתֵנָה לָכֶם, אָמְרוּ לְפָנָיו רַב־שׁ"ע נְבִיאֵינוּ עֲרָבִין לָנוּ, אָמַר לָהֶם יֵשׁ לִי עֲלֵיהֶם שְׂנֵאָמַר (ירמיה ב) וְהָרְעִים פִּשְׁעוֹ בִי וְגו' וְכֹתִיב (יחזקאל יג) כְּשִׁעָלִים בְּחֶרְבוֹת נְבִיאִיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיוּ, אֶלֶּא הִבִּיאוּ לִי עֲרָבִים טוֹבִים וְאֶתְנַנֶּה לָכֶם, אָמְרוּ הֲרִי בְּיָנוּ עוֹרָבִים אוֹתָנוּ, אָמַר הַקַּב"ה הֲאֵל וְדָאֵי עֲרָבִים טוֹבִים עַל יְדֵיהֶם אֶתְנַנֶּה לָכֶם, הֲ"ד (תהלים ח) מִפִּי עוֹלָלִים וְיוֹנְקִים יִסְדַּת עֹז, וְאִין עֹז אֶלֶּא תּוֹרָה, שְׂנֵאָמַר (שם /תהלים/ כט) ה' עֹז לְעַמּוֹ יִתֵּן.

MIDRASH RABBAH SHIR HASHIRIM 1:3

When Israel stood [at Sinai] to receive the Torah, the Holy Blessing One said to them: "I am giving you my Torah. Give Me good guarantors that will guard it, and I will give it to you."

Israel said: "Our ancestors are our guarantors." The Holy Blessing One replied: "I have issues with your ancestors. I have an issue with Abraham, who asked me, 'How shall I know?' [Genesis 15:8]; an issue with Isaac who loved Esau whom I hated, as it says, 'I have hated Esau,' [Malachi 1:3]; and an issue with Jacob, who said, 'My way is hidden from the Holy One.' [Isaiah 40:27] Give me good guarantors and I shall give you the gift of the Torah."

They said: "Ruler of the universe, our prophets are our guarantors."

The Holy Blessing One replied: "I have issues with them, as it says, 'The shepherds transgressed against me,' [Jeremiah 2:8] and it is written, '[Your prophets have been] like jackals among ruins.' [Ezekiel 13:4] Give me good guarantors and I shall give you the gift of the Torah."

They said: "Our children are our guarantors."

The Holy Blessing One said: "They are certainly the best guarantors. For their sake I give you the Torah." For it is written, 'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings you have established strength,' [Psalms 8:2] and 'strength' means Torah, as it says, 'God will give strength to his people.' [Psalms 29:11]"

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Who are the ancestors and why would the Israelites believe they would be good guarantors?
- Who are the prophets and why would the Israelites believe they would be good guarantors?
- Who are the children and why would the Israelites believe they would be good guarantors?
- Why did God reject the ancestors and the prophets but accept the children?



BIRTH AND CONCEPTION – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

BLESSING FOR A DAUGHTER

Our God and God of our ancestors, sustain this child. Let her be known among the people Israel as _____ daughter of _____ and _____. May her mother be blessed with renewed strength and may both parents find joy in their child, as it is written: “It was this child I prayed for: and Adonai has granted me what I sought.” [1 Samuel 27] Fulfill for her, Adonai our God, that which is written: “She opens her mouth with wisdom and the Torah of lovingkindness is on her tongue.” [Proverbs 31:26] Let us give thanks to Adonai for Adonai is good; God’s loving kindness is forever. May this child [first name only] grow into greatness as a blessing to her family, to the Jewish people and to all humanity. May her (parents/mother) be privileged to raise (their/her) child to womanhood and may _____ enjoy the blessings of Torah, *huppah and ma’asim tovim*. And let us say: Amen.

BLESSING FOR A SON

Our God and God of our ancestors, sustain this child. Let him be known among the people Israel as _____ son of _____ and _____. May his mother be blessed with regained strength and may both parents find joy in their child. With love and wisdom may they be privileged to teach him the meaning of the covenant which he has entered today, and may they inspire him to seek the truth and the ways of peace. Through their example, may his heart be open to the Torah and its ways. May this child [first name only] grow into greatness as a blessing to his family, to the Jewish people and to all humanity. As he has entered the covenant, so may he attain the blessings of Torah, *huppah and ma’asim tovim*, good deeds.

– From *Moreh Derekh*, published by the Rabbinical Assembly. Used with permission.





Published in partnership with the
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism,
the Rabbinical Assembly,
the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs
and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.



ZIEGLER SCHOOL OF
RABBINIC STUDIES
AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

15600 MULHOLLAND DRIVE • BEL AIR, CA 90077