

## Jewish Fertility and Infertility

### *Shabbat Tol'dot 5785*

November 29, 2024

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Two weeks ago, LAFTY, our high school youth group, hosted a regional conclave. Their theme was “Survivor,” emphasizing that our Jewish people has thrived in the wake of catastrophe, time and again. That weekend, the Torah portion, *Vayeira*, included the Binding of Isaac. On Shabbat morning, the teens put Abraham on trial for the crime of risking the future of the Jewish people aborning by nearly killing his only son at God’s command.

Single-minded concern with maintaining this people grows after that perilous moment. Abraham quickly seeks a wife for Isaac, making a next generation possible. The search for Isaac’s bride, ending in the successful match with Rebekah, is central to last week’s portion.

This week, our portion begins, ואלה תולדת יצחק, “This is the line of Isaac,” a common formula in the Torah, usually followed by a list of children and often subsequent generations, too. This time, though, we read: “Isaac pleaded with יהוה on behalf of his wife, for she was childless.” The prayer succeeds: “and יהוה acceded to his entreaty, so his wife Rebekah became pregnant.”<sup>i</sup>

Ever since, Judaism has been fixated on fertility, specifically with childbearing by women. If a woman has not borne a child in the first ten years of marriage, the Talmud requires her husband to divorce her or take a second wife, since he must fulfill **his** obligation to procreate.<sup>ii</sup> An important Talmudic rabbi, Rava, taught that, when we come before God in divine judgment after death, we will be asked, “Did you procreate?”<sup>iii</sup>

More recently, “the continuity industry” arose, obsessed with maintaining the size of the American Jewish community.

Focusing on the fertility question, Ben Wattenberg and Jeremy Kadden wrote in 2005, “In order for a population to remain constant over the course of generations, women must bear, on average, 2.1 children. Estimates of American Jewish fertility vary from 1.4 to 1.9 children...In fact, signs of ... depopulation are already beginning to show,” with the American Jewish population sliding “from 5.5 million in 1990 to 5.2 million in 2000,” a time when “the total U.S. population grew by more than 30 million people.”<sup>iv</sup>

The authors know where to place the blame: “Many demographers have stressed the changed role of women as a general demographic correlative of

plunging global fertility.” In other words, opportunities for women outside the home have decreased childbearing. The authors put the word “liberation” in quotes when they write, “Other general ‘liberation’ factors have played a role...: high levels of both divorce and cohabitation, for instance, which are both correlated with low fertility rates.”<sup>v</sup>

Wattenberg and Kadden were wrong. The 2020 Pew Study of the Jewish Americans documented a population of some 7.5 million.<sup>vi</sup>

Worse, demographers’ conclusions were predicated on patriarchal notions about how people born into women’s bodies should live their lives. In 2017, Steven Cohen and Sylvia Barack Fishman insisted, “Jews will need to start marrying, marry younger, marry Jewish spouses, and raise Jewish children...Creating more Jewish marriages and filling more Jewish baby carriages inevitably leads to seeing more Jews in the pews, as well as other places where Jewish engagement gets acted out.”<sup>vii</sup> In the wake of 2018 sexual harassment claims, which he confessed were true, Cohen lost his job as a professor at Hebrew Union College, where both Cantor Jacobson and I were ordained. Rokhi Kafrissen had long criticized Cohen and others like him; “Making marriage and fertility a subject of greatest communal interest, and giving it the quasi-scientific cover of academic inquiry, legitimizes the erosion of Jewish women’s control of their own fertility, and thus independence, in the service of the greater cause of ‘continuity.’ Indeed, Cohen’s ‘continuity’ looked a lot like old fashioned, anti-feminist backlash.” In the wake of Cohen’s being unmasked as a sexual harasser, she asked, “[H]ow surprised can we be that a man whose entire worldview hinged on women having more babies turned out to have no respect for women when it came to personal sexual boundaries?”<sup>viii</sup>

In the real lives of people of all genders, single or partnered in whatever way, childbearing and questions of fertility are deeply personal. Infertility may be especially painful, and not because of concerns for the Jewish future.

As Genesis continues to unfold, we will see infertility again—this time, not as a threat to our people’s existence, but as personal sadness. Jacob, a son of Isaac and Rebekah, has two wives, Leah and Rachel, who are sisters. Mindful that Jacob loves Rachel, but “seeing that Leah was disfavored, יְהוָה opened her womb, while Rachel was childless.”<sup>ix</sup> Leah bears five sons and a daughter, and two concubines bear another five, eleven Children of Israel who will ensure the covenant’s continuity. Still, Torah reveals Rachel’s pain: “When Rachel saw that she was not bearing [children] to Jacob, Rachel came to envy her sister. She said to Jacob, ‘Let me have children; otherwise, I am a dead woman!’”<sup>x</sup> Eventually, God “opens her womb,” too.<sup>xi</sup>

I have known pain like Rachel's. Robert and Daniel are the blessings of my life, godsend who came after an extended period of infertility and years of costly, time-and-anxiety-producing fertility treatments, much more painful for their mother than for me.

When we were uncertain that we would have children of our own, my concern was not for the future of the Jewish people, but rather about what Toni and I wanted for our lives. I knew that Judaism permits fertility treatment, but I confess that I would have willingly participated in that process even if Jewish law prohibited it.

Today, my primary concern about fertility treatment is access. As we recently saw in Alabama, some people who view the status of any fertilized egg as a person with rights like yours and mine would shut down standard infertility treatment. Moreover, even in places where the right to reproductive healthcare is protected by law, fertility treatment is unavailable to most people simply because it is so expensive and not often covered by insurance or Medicaid. Believe it or not, Arkansas has a good fertility treatment coverage law.<sup>xii</sup>

The decision to become a parent—whether, when, and how—is best left to individuals, and, if they wish, their partners, healthcare providers, clergy, and other advisors. No individual or couple—or group of people, such as Jews with uteruses—should be pressured to become parents or not to do so on the basis of an agenda, no matter how laudable.

This week's Torah portion is not the only one that features the word תולדת in its opening phrase. That's also true of פרשת נח, about Noah and the flood. There, too, the word תולדת is not immediately followed by a list of progeny—but instead, the sentence, “Noah was a righteous person.”<sup>xiii</sup> Our sages explain that Noah's righteousness is his legacy, as is the case for all virtuous individuals,<sup>xiv</sup> whether or not they have biological children. Moreover, Rabbi Samuel teaches in the Talmud that anyone who teaches Torah to a child earns merit equivalent to being that child's parent.<sup>xv</sup>

Each of us can do our part for the future of our Jewish people—some of us, by having children of our own; others, by supporting family and friends who bring children into the world; and still others, by teaching the next generations. We all have roles to play to ensure that Judaism thrives לדור ודור, from generation to generation.

Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Genesis 25:19-21.

- 
- <sup>ii</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 64a.
- <sup>iii</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a.
- <sup>iv</sup> Ben Wattenberg and Jeremy Kadden, “Jewish Babies,” *American Enterprise Institute*, December 1, 2005, <https://www.aei.org/articles/jewish-babies/>.
- <sup>v</sup> Wattenberg and Kadden.
- <sup>vi</sup> “Jewish Americans in 2020.”
- <sup>vii</sup> Steven M. Cohen and Sylvia Barack Fishman, “Fewer marriages and fewer children means fewer Jews doing Jewish,” *JTA*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.jta.org/2017/06/20/united-states/fewer-marriages-and-fewer-children-means-fewer-jews-doing-jewish>.
- <sup>viii</sup> Rokhi Kafirissen, “How A #MeToo Scandal Proved What We Already Know: ‘Jewish Continuity’ is Sexist,” *The Forward*, July 20, 2018, <https://forward.com/opinion/406271/how-a-metoo-scandal-proved-what-we-already-know-jewish-continuity-is/>.
- <sup>ix</sup> Genesis 29:31.
- <sup>x</sup> Genesis 30:1.
- <sup>xi</sup> Genesis 30:22-23.
- <sup>xii</sup> “Arkansas,” ReproductiveFacts.org, American Society for Reproductive Medicine, <https://www.reproductivefacts.org/patient-advocacy/state-and-territory-infertility-insurance-laws/arkansas/>.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Genesis 6:9.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Rashi to Genesis 6:9, citing *B'reishit Rabbah* 30:6.
- <sup>xv</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 19b.