

Be Fruitful and Multiply

In this week's Torah portion, *Bereshit*, the first in the annual cycle, we read the following commandment:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:
וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלְאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וּכְבַשְׁתֶּהּ וּרְדוּ בָדָגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם
וּבְכָל-חַיָּה הָרֹמֶשֶׂת עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

And God created mankind in His image... male and female He created them.
God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply! Fill the earth and subdue it, and rule... all [other] living things." [Genesis 1:27-28]

The commandment is repeated after the Flood:

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. [Genesis 9:1]

P'ru urvu. Be fruitful and multiply. This commandment sounds simple enough, right? Yet it raises a host of questions:

- Is it one of the 613 commandments?
- Who does it apply to? Both men and women? Both Jews and non-Jews?
- How many children must a couple have to fulfill the obligation? Of what sex? Is there a limit? When should they marry and start trying?
- What if a couple can't have children?
- Looking to the future, do clones count as children?
- What if the children die before their parents, heaven forbid?
- Is contraception allowed so couples can choose the timing of their children's birth?
- Does the commandment apply even when food is scarce, times are difficult, disease is rampant, or progeny is likely to have severe birth defects or die in war?

Let us try to answer these questions in light of the Jewish tradition.

First, procreation is indeed one of the 613 commandments. It is positive commandment number 212 in Maimonides' list.

Now, who is obligated to “be fruitful and multiply”? The answer is: All men. Not women. If a woman decides not to marry and not to have children, she is free to make that decision and is not violating a Torah injunction. Why so? There are several possible reasons. First, the Talmud says that the Torah implies women were not addressed in the commandment:

[The Torah says:] “Be fruitful and multiply! Fill the earth and subdue it!” [Genesis 1:27-28] It is the manner of a man to subdue, but not the manner of a woman. [Yevamot 65b]

Also, Rabbi Meir Simcha Hakohen of Dvinsk [Meshekh Chokhmah on Gen. 9:7] from 20th-century Russia gives a compassionate reason: The Torah does not obligate people to perform painful tasks [e.g., Yevamot 87b]. So it exempts women because giving birth is very painful and risky. The Book of Proverbs says of the Torah:

Her ways are the ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. [Proverbs 3:17]

However, a woman does receive rewards, even more than a man, if she decides to have a child, because the Mishnah says:

The reward is according to the effort. [Avot 5:23]

I believe the Torah does not command us to do things we would naturally want to do. Most women *want* to have children, so it is not necessary to command them to do so. Many men prefer to have a lot of relationships with no commitment, so *they* must be commanded.

A minority disagrees [e.g., Shabbat 111a] and holds that women are also commanded, but they were overruled.

When should a man begin to have children? Maimonides says:

A man becomes obligated to fulfill this mitzvah from the time he reaches seventeen. If he reaches twenty and has not married, he has transgressed. But if he delays to study Torah, it is permitted, because while one performs one mitzvah one is not obligated to perform another mitzvah. [Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Marriage 15:2]

Witness Ben Azzai in the Talmud, who never married so he could study Torah all the time:

Ben Azzai says: “[Anyone who does not engage in the mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply] is as though he sheds blood.” They said to him: Some people expound well and fulfill well, and some do not expound well and fulfill well. But you, [who never married], expound well and do not fulfill well. He said to them: What shall I

do? My soul yearns for Torah! It is possible for the world to be maintained by others. [Yevamot 63b]

If you don't get married by the age of 20, the Talmud says that God gets angry:

Rav Huna says: If one is 20 and has not yet married, all his days will be in a state of sin [because sex is always on his mind]... Rava and the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: Until a man is 20, the Holy One, Blessed be He, sits and waits, saying: When will he marry? If he is 20 and has not married, He says: Let his bones swell. [Kiddushin 29b]

The commandment to procreate is so important that it even overrides many other laws. Consider the case of the slave with two masters. One of them frees him but the other does not. So he is half slave and half free. The court can force his other master to free him as well, so he can procreate:

Bet Hillel say that a Jew who is half slave and half free [because only one of his two owners freed him] serves his master every other day and is free every other day. Bet Shammai say: [If you do this, then he] cannot marry a slave woman because he is half free and he cannot marry a free woman because he is half slave. But... the world was created only for procreation, as Isaiah stated:

[God] did not create [the world] to be a waste. He formed it to be inhabited. [Isaiah 45:18]

So, for the betterment of the world, his master must free him [and the slave must promise] to pay half his value to his master [when he can afford it]. And Bet Hillel ultimately retracted their opinion and ruled according to Bet Shammai. [Gittin 41a-b]

Score one for Shammai! He doesn't always lose his debate with Hillel.

Another example from the Talmud:

Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Meir: [If you own] a Torah scroll, you may sell it only if you need the money to study Torah or to marry a woman. [Megillah 27a, Shulchan Arukh, Even Hoezer 1:2]

The Midrash says our ultimate redemption depends on us having children:

Just like the Jews were redeemed from Egypt in the merit of their having children, so too they will be redeemed in the future in the merit of their having children. [Tanna debei Eliyahu Zuta 14]

Are non-Jews commanded to procreate? Yes and no:

-No, because the commandment to procreate is not one of the seven Noahide laws that apply to all mankind, namely: No idolatry, murder, blaspheming, adultery, stealing, and eating live animals, and establishing courts of justice. The Talmud says that any

commandments that were not repeated at Sinai (such as procreation) apply only to Jews. [Sanhedrin 59a] So when God commanded Adam and Noah's family to procreate, He addressed only them *personally*, because they were the only humans in existence.

-But yes, non-Jews are also commanded to procreate because of the quote from Isaiah we saw earlier applies to all humans:

[God] did not create [the world] to be a waste; He formed it to be inhabited. [Isaiah 45:18]

How many children do you need to have to fulfill your obligation? Shammai says two boys. Hillel says a boy and girl, because the Torah said:

Male and female He created them. [Genesis 5:2]

Hillel prevailed (as usual). [Yevamot 61b] Halakha encourages us also to attempt to have even more children. [Yevamot 62b] Also, if a man had children as a non-Jew, then converted, he has fulfilled his obligation even if his children do not also convert. [Biur HaGra 17] Children of illegal unions do count towards the mitzvah to procreate. [Yevamot Y 2:6; Rema, Even HaEzer 1:6]

There is no final decision on whether clones qualify as progeny, but some rabbis would accept them because their *origin* is human, as the Talmud says:

Rabbi Meir said if a woman gives birth to something that looks like an animal, it is [still] considered a full-fledged offspring. [Niddah 23b]

If a man's children die while he is alive, he has not yet fulfilled his obligation, unless the dead children themselves left a boy and a girl among them. [Yevamot 62a; Shulchan Arukh, Even HaEzer 1:6]

What to do in cases of infertility? Artificial insemination is permitted, but only if using the husband's sperm. In-vitro fertilization is also permitted. The Mishnah says that if a couple remains infertile after ten years of marriage, they should divorce and marry others. [Yevamot 64a] This is not always followed, witness the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who was childless and remained married to his wife for life. So were other great sages. Some argue that the obligation to divorce applies only in Israel. [Hagahot Maimoniot, Hilchot Ishut 15:4] Others say that adopting children fulfills the mitzvah. [Chochmat Shlomo, Even Haezer 1:1]

Contraception is permitted when the wife does not want to become pregnant or if a pregnancy would harm her. It's her decision. She may

then use contraception *herself*, such as with the contraceptive pill, a diaphragm, or an intrauterine device. In olden days she drank a potion. But the husband may not use a condom. Vasectomies and sterilizing drugs are not allowed either, except for medical reasons.

Abortion is required when the life of a pregnant mother is in danger. The Mishnah says that the baby is then considered a *rodef*, a pursuer:

If a woman is in [life-threatening] labor, one [must] cut up the child in her womb and bring it out limb by limb, because her life comes before the life of [the child]. But if the greater part [of the child] has already come out, one may not touch it, for one may not sacrifice one person's life for another person's life. [Oholot 7:6]

Nevertheless, one must first try to save the mother by maiming the fetus, such as by amputating a limb. Also, aborting a defective fetus is not allowed.

What can we conclude? Some worry that the population of the world is growing faster than new food production technologies, and the world may not have enough resources to sustain it. This may be true in some places, but not in all. As I mentioned, the Sages have repeatedly stressed the great importance of Jews procreating. The more observant Jews have more children. In view of Jewish history, it is an existential imperative. Consider this: The Roman census of the year 48 counted 7.5 million Jews in the Roman Empire, or 10% of the total, not counting the large Jewish community of Babylonia. Today our numbers are a scarce 14 million. We have not even doubled in 2,000 years, while the population of the rest of the world has been multiplied by 30. Today, Jews are only one-fifth of one percent of humanity. We must keep this firmly in mind, because the specter of the disappearance of Judaism looms large over us, generation after antisemitic generation. Let the recent massacre of Jews in Israel be a reminder of that.

Shabbat shalom.