

Dvar Torah, Parshat Naso, May 31 2014

There's a classic joke about 4 Jewish women sitting on a park bench: "oy" "oy vey" "oy vey iz mir" "please, ladies, I thought we weren't going to discuss the children!"

Clearly, fertility and family are at the center of Jewish tradition and Jewish culture. It's at the heart of the Torah.

One of the first commandments God tells to Adam and Hava is "p'ru u'rvu", be fruitful and multiply.

Our culture and religion are built entirely around the idea of having families, generations after us to continue following the mitzvot.

We read every day in the Shma, "V'shinantam l'vaneicha," teach to your children. We connect back to our ancestors every time we daven, "elohei Avraham, elohei Yitzchak, v'elohei Yaakov." It's a complete line connecting us to the past and to the future.

This week's parsha discusses the laws of Sotah, the woman who is suspected of being unfaithful. The investigation of this woman requires a convoluted procedure of having her swear an oath that she was not unfaithful, drinking the "bitter waters" and risking her life.

Then, it says of the suspected Sotah who is cleared of wrongdoing and survives the interrogation procedure: "v'nizrah zera" – she will have children (QUOTE PASUK).

The Gemara on *Berakhot* 31b asks - But doesn't this encourage women to act promiscuously, or at least to pretend to, for the sake of having children?

"No, it teaches that if she formerly bore with pain she now bears with ease, if she bore short children she now bears tall ones, if she bore swarthy ones she now bears fair ones, if she was destined to bear one she will now bear two."

Even if we don't follow the p'shat (that she will have children), the theme of pregnancy and fertility is still present.

But that's not what I want to discuss with you today. Instead, I want to talk about something that's virtually taboo to mention today, that people in our society don't talk about, yet appears all across the Torah – infertility.

When Rachel and I were first married we lived in Brooklyn in an apartment building with many other young, religious couples. We didn't quite fit in – for many reasons, but primarily because we didn't have children. Someone once told us, 'I would have you over for a meal on Shabbos, but then who would my kids play with?'

These words were more than unthinking – they cut us to the core, excising us from the community because of something beyond our control.

The inability to have children is, in reality, a common theme in Judaism.

In Hallel we read: “moshivi akeret ha bayit, eim habanim smeicha” – the barren becomes the happy mother of children.

Tzion itself is called barren: “Rani Akarah, lo yaladah” (Isaiah 54:1) – God redeems the one unable to conceive.

Story from this week's Haftarah of the wife of Manoach – she is barren, and the angel appears before her. She will have a child consecrated to god as a Nazir from the moment of birth (Shimson).

Why is it relevant that she's barren? Why couldn't it be someone who already has children?

Let's look at other stories in Tanach that are similar. The theme of barren women appears repeatedly in Tanach. Infertility, in fact, is at least as prevalent as fertility.

First - it's quite similar to the story of Hannah and the birth of Samuel, who has to come in to the world through someone who is barren. She prays with pure desperation for a child, to the point where Eli thinks she's drunk.

Sarah is barren, Rivka is barren, Rachel is barren and complains to Jacob – give me children for “if not I will die”.

Rachel so longs for a child that she trades the “dudaim” of Reuven to Leah for her night with Yaakov. She loses her night with Yaakov just to have these dudaim, apparently some sort of assisted reproduction, in her quest to have children.

Why did the Imahot have to be barren?

Gemara in Yevamot 64a, commenting on the Mishnah, examines why it was necessary:

The Mishnah says: IF A MAN TOOK A WIFE AND LIVED WITH HER FOR TEN YEARS AND SHE BORE NO CHILD, HE MAY NOT ABSTAIN [ANY LONGER FROM THE DUTY OF PROPAGATION] – in other words he must divorce her.

In the Gemara: R. Isaac stated: Why were our ancestors barren? — Because the Holy One, blessed be He, longs to hear the prayer of the righteous.

So, the more righteous you are, the more God wants your prayers.....?)

This is a bitter pill to swallow, however, for anyone who has known the sting of infertility.

You might almost say, ala Fiddler on the Roof: “God, I appreciate that you want my prayers, but maybe you could want someone else’s for a while!”

Another possible answer as to why:

The Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* 45:4: R. Azariah said in R. Hanina’s name: So that they might lean on their husbands despite their beauty. R. Huna and R. Jeremiah in the name of R. Hiyya b. Abba said: So that they might pass the greater parts of their life untrammelled. R. Huna, R. Idi, and R. Avin in R. Meir’s name said: So that their husbands might derive pleasure from them, for when a woman is with child she is disfigured and lacks grace. Thus, the whole ninety years that Sarah did not bear she was like a bride in her canopy.

These are also not very satisfactory answers, clearly. Who would trade their potential children for their beauty, for their freedom, when our entire system of living revolves around family?

So, then, why did Chana or the wife of Manoach have to be barren? Because this type of person won't argue, they are so desperate to have a child that they will do absolutely anything to have. They will be happy to do this, any rule, any stricture, whatever they are told to do they will. No wine, no grape products, give my child up to serve God at the age of 3 – yes.

So what is the answer? Why all this barrenness? Why the suffering?

In the end, perhaps the point is that there is no answer.

We have to make the most of what we have and live our lives the best we can, without being able to know *why* – to trust, and to pray, and to muddle through the best we can. And to hope that in the end the discouragement is worth the ultimate outcome.