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Be Fruitful and Multiply: Limits and Challenges



Parshat Bereshit
Genesis 1:1 – 6:8

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
With love to their grandchildren
Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren Z"L, Jenny, David, Lauren, Zenfira, and Emily

Do you have thoughts, comments or questions on Table Torah Talk?
Please share them with me at haravmark@optonline.net

As we begin the third cycle of Torah Table Talk, I am pleased to share with you a slightly different approach to the weekly Torah portion for the coming year. This year TTT will focus on the Torah as guide to daily living. In each weekly installment we will learn about a mitzvah which appears in that Parshah, or a basic value which we can apply to our daily life.

The first commandment in the Torah is 'to be fruitful and multiply.' After creating the first couple, God commands them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. This is the first of the 613 commandments in the Torah. But what does it mean to fill the earth particularly in an age when the earth is becoming overpopulated. While the Mishnah specifies the number of children one is obligated to have, some take this to mean that one should have as many children as possible. Do you think there is such a thing as a right number of children? How about those who can not or choose not to have children? Despite the emphasis on procreation, the problem of infertility is not a new problem. It would appear that even in the time of the Mishnah people wrestled with the issue of having children.

Genesis 1:27-28

And God created man (adam) in His image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and to all things that creep on the earth.'

Yevamot 6:6

A man should not neglect the commandment of "be fruitful and multiply" unless he already has children. The school of Shammai teaches: two sons. The school of Hillel teaches: a son and a daughter, since it says: male and female he created them." If a man marries a woman and lives with her ten years and they have no children, he cannot neglect it any longer. When he divorces her, she is permitted to marry another. The second husband can wait for her ten more years. If she miscarries we begin the count from the time of the miscarriage. A man is commanded to be fruitful and multiply but not a woman. Rabbi Johanan ben Berukah said: Both are commanded as it says, "And God blessed them and said: 'Be fruitful and multiply:'"

Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah Yevamot

The school of Shammai deduced this from Moses (who had two sons). The school of Hillel argued (that Moses only had sons and not daughters) because he choose to separate himself from his wife when he became a prophet and therefore we can not learn from his behavior. Rather we can conclude that one should have a son and a daughter in order to continue the

species. Doctors know that there are many factors causing couples not to give birth. Sometimes the cause is the man, sometimes the woman, and sometimes it is the combination of the two of them together. Therefore he should divorce her and marry another, but she is not permitted to marry a third since it is presumed that she is barren. The reason for waiting ten years relates to Abraham since he dwelled in the Land of Canaan ten years and afterwards it was presumed that Sarah was barren so she gave him Hagar...

Meshekh Chokhma to Genesis 9:7, Rabbi Meir Simchah Hakohen of Dvinsk:

It is not amiss to assume that the reason why women are exempt from the obligation of procreation is grounded in the reasonableness of the judgment of the Lord and His ways. The Torah did not impose upon Israel burdens too difficult for a person to bear... Women, whose lives are jeopardized by conception and birth were not enjoined.

Shir Hashirim Rabbah, 1:4, Translation by Francine Klagsbrun

A couple who lived in Sidon had been married for ten years without having children. The husband demanded a divorce, and the couple went to see Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. The rabbi, who strongly opposed divorces tried to convince them to stay together. But the husband was adamant. Since you are resolved to divorce, the rabbi told them, you should give a party to celebrate your separation just as you gave one to celebrate your wedding.

The couple agreed. During the course of the party the husband who had drunk much wine, said to his wife, "My dear, before we separate choose whatever you consider most precious in this house and take it with you when you return to your father's house." After the husband had fallen into a drunken sleep, the woman ordered her servants to carry him to her father's house and put him to bed there. In the middle of the night the husband awoke. "Where am I," he asked. "At my father's house," his wife replied. "You told me to take whatever I considered most precious to me. There is nothing more precious to me than you." Moved by his wife's love, the husband decided to remain married and they lived together happily after that.

Questions to Ponder

1. The schools of Shammai and Hillel disagree about how many children one is obligated to have. How do they differ from one another? Do you think of having children as an obligation, a responsibility, or simply a choice? Do you think that Jews have a special need to think about this issue after the holocaust?
2. What reasons other than physical inability to conceive might a couple have for not having children? Do you think the Jewish tradition lays an unfair burden of guilt on such couples? How might a rabbi or a Jewish counselor advice or help such a couple.
3. Why do the rabbis disagree about who the obligation to procreate applies to? Is there a basis for this difference of opinion in the biblical verse quoted above?
4. How do you reconcile the story of the couple from Sidon with the Halachah? When is it appropriate for a rabbi to advice people to make decisions that are contrary to halachah?
5. Congregational life places a great deal of emphasis on family and children. What can congregations do today to be more inclusive of couples who don't have children? Should we talk about procreation as a Mitzvah? What about people who can't have children?
6. Is adoption a legitimate way of fulfilling the Mitzvah of "be fruitful and multiply?"

"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."
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