

Be Fruitful and Multiply

Parshat Bereishit

By Aryeh Citron

The first mitzvah in the Torah is "to be fruitful and multiply." As the verse in Genesis¹ states: "And G_d said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...'" After the Flood, G_d repeated this commandment to Noah: "And G_d blessed Noah and his sons, and He said to them²: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.'"³

This mitzvah is considered a "great mitzvah" and in some cases even overrides certain other laws.⁴

Furthermore, by having children one is actually hastening the ultimate redemption. In the words of the Talmud,⁵ "The son of David [Moshiach] will not come until there are no more souls in the [Heavenly storage house called] *guf*." In a similar vein, the Midrash⁶ tells us: "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 having children."⁷

One who intentionally does not fulfill this mitzvah is considered analogous to a murderer – for he, too, has depleted life – and is said to be minimizing the Divine presence in this world.⁸ From this we understand that one who does fulfill this mitzvah is increasing the Divine presence in this world.

The Basic Mitzvah

The minimum requirement of this mitzvah is to have a son and a daughter.⁹

But if possible one should try to have as many children as possible. In the words of Isaiah¹⁰: "He did not create [the world] for a waste, He formed it to be inhabited." From this verse we learn that gentiles too have a mitzvah to have children.¹¹

In the words of Rabbi Yehoshua:¹² "If one had children when he was young, he should continue to have children when he is old. As the verse¹³ states: 'In the morning, sow your seed, and in the evening, do not withhold your hand, for you know not which will succeed, this one or that one, or whether both of them will be equally good.'"

The Details

- If one has a son and a daughter and one of them passes away before he does (G_d forbid), he has not fulfilled this mitzvah.¹⁴ If, however, one's child had a child before passing away, the grandparent has still fulfilled the mitzvah, as long as he still has a male and female descendant who are the offspring of his male and female child—even if the grandson is from his daughter and the granddaughter from his son.¹⁵

- One fulfills this mitzvah no matter any disabilities the child(ren) may, G d forbid, have.¹⁶
- This mitzvah is only mandatory for men. For women it is a mitzvah, but one that is not obligatory. This is derived from various verses.¹⁷ When a woman has a child, she is considered to be sharing her husband's mitzvah equally with him, because he was only able to fulfill the mitzvah because of her "partnership."¹⁸
- If a man had children as a gentile, and he then converted to Judaism with his children, he is considered to have fulfilled this mitzvah.¹⁹ Some say he has fulfilled the mitzvah even if his children do not convert with him.²⁰

Infertility

A couple having difficulty conceiving and bearing children should seek medical counsel. At the same time, the couple should be in contact with a rabbi who has experience in this field. This is because fertility treatments often involve methods that are halachically questionable; e.g., wastage of (male) seed.

Although the details are beyond the scope of this article, we will address some of the treatments and the halachic issues which arise.

1. When the doctors wish to test the viability of the male sperm, there are preferred halachic methods as to how to obtain this so as to minimize the prohibition of wasting seed.²¹
2. Certain tests performed on the woman may cause her to become a *niddah*. She should therefore check with her rabbi. If the test is in fact one that will render her a *niddah*, she may want to schedule it for just before or just after her period so as to avoid the need for the couple to separate for extra days.
3. According to most halachic authorities, it is permissible for a woman to receive artificial insemination using the husband's sperm. Nevertheless, it is essential that there be proper supervision to ensure that there are no mistakes.²² (The Puah Institute has trained supervisors who are available around the world to serve couples in treatment.)
4. Likewise, according to most authorities, if the husband's sperm and the wife's egg are being used, IVF treatment is permitted. Nevertheless, proper supervision is essential, as mentioned above.²³
5. It is forbidden for a woman to receive the sperm of a Jewish man who is not her husband.²⁴
6. It is unclear whether the use of a donor egg is permissible or not. There is also a question as to who is considered the mother of the child, which also raises the question (in the case of a

gentile donor) as to whether or not the child will need to be converted.²⁵

Segulahs for Having Children

There are several *segulahs* (spiritually propitious acts) for having children:

- A. Being scrupulous about the laws of Family Purity.²⁶
- B. Ensuring and helping others to observe the laws of Family Purity.
- C. Supporting Jewish education.²⁷
- D. Enabling others to perform the mitzvah of circumcision.²⁸
- E. Making meals (or *farbrengens*) for guests.²⁹
- F. Studying and teaching Chassidut (the mystical dimension of Torah). This is because studying Chassidut is intended to bring a person to love and fear of G d, which are referred to in Kabbalistic terminology as the "son" and "daughter."³⁰
- G. Asking forgiveness from anyone that may have been hurt as a result of the marriage of the now childless couple—e.g., a jilted suitor, an unmarried older sister.³¹
- H. Checking the husband's *tefillin* and the *mezuzahs* in the home.³²
 - I. For the wife, making sure to give *tzedakah* (charity) before lighting the Shabbat and holiday candles.³³
- J. Being a *kvatter* (the couple who bring the baby in to the room of the circumcision ceremony). It is a common custom to honor a childless couple or one that is having trouble having additional children with this function.³⁴
- K. Living in Israel.³⁵

One who is Unable to Have Children

One who is unable to have children (G d forbid) should bring up an orphan in his home and it will be as if he bore him, or he should support a Torah scholar who will then be considered his son. He should also perpetuate his name by donating items for holy use. If he is a Torah scholar, he should write a Torah book, and teach many students.³⁶

FOOTNOTES

1. 1:28.

2. Genesis 9:1. But see Aruch Hashulchan Even Ha'ezer 1:2, who understands this verse to be a blessing and not a command.

3. When Jacob entered the land of Israel, G d repeated it to him: "And G d said to him, 'I am the Almighty G d; be fruitful and multiply...' See Talmud, Yevamot 65b as to what is learned from this repetition.
4. See Tosafot on Shabbat 4a, d.h. Vechi Omrim Lo Le'odam.
5. Yevamot 62a.
6. Tana Devei Eliyahu Zutah, 14.
7. The Midrash continues: "How do we know this? . . . As the verse (Isaiah 54:3) states: 'For right and left shall you prevail, and your seed shall inherit nations and repopulate desolate cities.'" I.e., when the Jews fill the world – right and left – then we will repopulate the desolate cities of Israel.
8. Code of Jewish Law, Even Ha'Ezer 1:1.
9. The opinion of Beit Hillel in Yevamot 61b.
10. 45:18.
11. Talmud, Bechorot 47a. Some say that the Biblical command to "be fruitful and multiply" applies to them too (She'iltot no. 165).
12. Talmud, Yevamot 62b.
13. Ecclesiastes 11:6.
14. Code of Jewish Law, ibid. 6.
15. Ibid.
16. Rama, ibid. 6.
17. See Talmud, ibid. 65b.
18. Teshuvot HaRan s. 32.
19. Yevamot 62a, and Shulchan Aruch ibid. 7.
20. Bi'ur HaGra ibid. no. 17.
21. See the Encyclopedia of Jewish Medical Ethics by Rabbi Avrohom Steinberg, entry: Fertility and Infertility.
22. See ibid. entry: Artificial Insemination.
23. See ibid. entry: IVF Treatment.
24. Regarding using the sperm of a gentile, see Igrot Moshe Even Ha'ezer vol. 1 no. 71, but see Encyclopedia of Jewish Medical Ethics, ibid. that most authorities forbid this.
25. I have heard from Rabbi Morgenstern, a student of Rav Elyashiv (one of the leading halachic authorities of today), that a donor egg should not be used.
26. Midrash Rabbah Parshat Tazria, 14:7, based on the words of Ecclesiastes (11:2): "Give a portion to the seven" – i.e., observe the seven days of *niddah* – "and also to the eight" – i.e., in that merit you will have a son that you can circumcise on the eighth day. See also Sha'arei Halachah Uminhag, vol. 4, pg. 33.
27. I heard this from Rabbi Weberman, a senior rabbi in Miami Beach. I also found a Midrash – which I cannot presently locate – that said that in the merit of supporting other people's children's learning, one will merit a child of one's own. If any reader knows of this Midrash, please e-mail me or post it in the comment box below.
28. The midrash (the exact location eludes me right now) is based on the verse (Leviticus 12:2): "A woman will give seed and bear a son... and on the eighth day he shall be circumcised." The juxtaposition of these two mitzvot is understood to mean that in the merit of helping others perform circumcisions, one can merit to have his own child.
29. This is a *segulah* for a male child, as told by the Maggid of Mezritch to the Alter Rebbe (Sefer HaToldot Admur Ha'emtzo'i, pg. 19), based on a play on the words of Psalms (119:9) – "*Bameh yezakeh na'ar?*" – How does one merit a boy? – "*et archo*" – by having guests. See also the Kli Yakar on the beginning of Parshat Vayeira.
30. Sha'arei Halachah Uminhag, ibid. pg. 34, based on a letter of the Alter Rebbe.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Perhaps this is related to "D," above.

35. See Rashi on Talmud Yevamot 64a d.h. Mikeitz,
and ibid.

36. Peleh Yo'etz Ma'arechet Piryah Verivyah.

By Aryeh Citron

Rabbi Aryeh Citron was educated in Chabad yeshivahs in Los Angeles, New York, Israel and Australia. He was the Rosh Kollel of The Shul of Bal Harbour, Florida, and is now an adult Torah teacher in Surfside, Florida. He teaches classes on Talmud, Chassidism, Jewish history and contemporary Jewish law.

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