

# CHILDREN, OR CLEAN PANTS

*by Rabbi Yisrael Rutman*

A wise man once said: "A person has to make up his mind what he wants in life: Children or clean pants."

In the nation's capital, people are making up their minds, but while some prefer children, some prefer clean pants.

The Washington Post reported recently on scuffles in Washington D.C.'s gentrified Lincoln Park neighborhood between parents with children and adults without children.

One dog owner interviewed by the Post said that she wished the kids could be confined to a fenced-in area of the park. "I find people with children to be tyrants," she explained. "As someone who doesn't have children, I think children are fine. I don't think they own everything."

"Childfree" is the self-awarded euphemism for the aggressively childless. Don't think they are are some negligible lunatic fringe, either. The Post story detailed similar friction in other trendy Washington neighborhoods and generated 479 comments on the paper's website before commenting was finally shut down. Readers ran about 60-to-40 against parents and children, according to The Weekly Standard, which picked up on the story.

A sample of the venom: "Keep your nasty little snotty kid away from me, PLEASE!!!! Do not let your stickly offspring rush up to me in Whole Foods and grab my \$250 Ralph Lauren silk skirt with it's grubby, crusty hands. One of the benefits of not having children is not having to wear the Mommy Wardrobe. Do not make those of us who are not forced into wash and wear to pay extra for the dry cleaner to remove child goo. Do not allow your offspring to lean over the seat of a restaurant and try to initiate "conversation" with me when I am enjoying a meal with friends."

It is said that this culture of life without children began with predictions of a global population

explosion back in the 1960's. Bringing more mouths to feed into the world was thus thought to be selfish and unethical. A good global citizen reins in the natural desire for progeny, so as not to pollute the planet with messy kids.

The ethical argument against children has been updated from overpopulation to environmental consciousness: "Fewer emitters, fewer emissions," a bumper-sticker sentiment if ever there was one.

But the designer rant above says it all about the sophisticates who disdain child-raising for ostensibly moral reasons. It is virtually a caricature of selfishness, of the kind of person whose paramount concern is enjoying a meal and keeping her precious designer clothing clean.

It should come as no surprise that Judaism—the mother of religious tradition—comes down on the side of children over clean pants. In the Torah's account of the inception of the Jewish people, the patriarchs and matriarchs prayed to God for children. The Jewish national narrative is first and foremost a family narrative, the story of how Abraham promulgated monotheism not only by proclamation and debate, but through the children and grandchildren that he and Sarah brought into the world. Jacob's twelve sons became the twelve tribes of Israel, which continued as the foundation of nationhood as the people traveled and camped according to tribe in the wilderness wandering after the Exodus. The inheritance of the land of Israel was apportioned by both family and tribe; and the High Priest wore the insignia of each tribe on the Breastplate of Judgment during the Yom Kippur services in the Temple each year.

Maybe what so irks the "childfree" is that the very presence of parents and their drooling little ones is a reminder that life is not for ourselves alone; that as messy as having a family is—and it is—that without it there is no life worth having? Indeed, that without people who are willing to take the responsibility of having and raising children society eventually ceases, or gets taken over by immigrants with a different outlook.

On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and the days in between, we ask God to inscribe us in the Book of Life. But the prayer does not end there. It goes on to say "...for Your sake..."

We ask God to give us life not for ourselves only, but for the sake of serving Him, which means fulfilling the commandments in the Torah. Having children happens to be the very first commandment in the Torah.

Even if it means having to wear—perish the thought!—a mommy wardrobe.

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