

NOBODY EVER PROMISED WE'D UNDERSTAND

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

After creating Man, Hashem gives him a blessing (1:28):

And G-d blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and proliferate - fill the earth, and conquer it."

Rashi notes that the Hebrew spelling of "and (you p.) conquer it (ve'kibshua)" is deficient, as if it were to be read, "and (you s.) conquer it (ve'kabshe'ha)," addressing only Adam and not Chava (Eve). Chazal (our Sages) derive from this deficiency that only Man, whose way is to conquer (through warfare), is obligated in the mitzvah to procreate, while Woman, whose way is not (at least pre-feminism) to conquer, is technically exempt from this mitzvah.

Of all the possible ways the Torah could have chosen to exempt women from the technical obligation to fulfil the mitzvah of p'ru u'rvu (procreation), it seems strange that it chose to do so using the seemingly disconnected analogy of one's propensity to conquer.

Strewn throughout the Talmud, and numerous Midrashim, we find instances of people refusing to bear children during turbulent times. For instance, Amram, say Chazal (Sotah 12a), separated from Yocheved after hearing Pharaoh's decree that, "all male children be thrown into the Nile (Shemos/Exodus 1:22)." - "It is all for naught!" he said. It is only after his daughter, Miriam, admonished him, that he reconsidered and took her back. As a result, Moshe Rabbeinu was born.

The Gemara (Berachos 10a) also tells the story of King Chizkiyahu, who separated from his wife after he foresaw (with Ruach haKodesh [a form of prophecy]) that his progeny would stray from Hashem. The prophet Yeshaya (Isaiah) came to him to tell him (in the name of G-d) that as a result of this, he would die, and would not merit the eternal life of Olam haBa (the World to Come).

"But," he insisted, "I only did so because I foresaw that if I do give birth, my children will be wicked people!"

The prophet responded: "What business do you have among the hidden secrets of the Almighty? Do what you've been told to do (i.e. "Be fruitful and multiply"), and that which Hashem sees fit to do, He will do."

When referring to "the hidden secrets of the Almighty," notes the Be'er Yosef, the prophet uses the term Kavshei, derived from the same root letters as the word found here in the Torah "ve'kibshua." Perhaps, he says, the Torah means to say that our obligation to, "be fruitful and multiply," applies even when "hidden secrets" dictate otherwise. Even when, "it doesn't make sense to bring children

into such a world," we must bury our knowledge and our feelings, and do what we've been told to do. Hashem will do as He sees fit.

The Gemara (Sotah ibid.) says that during the subjugation of the Jews in Egypt, other men followed Amram's example, and as a result of the slavery and indecencies they suffered, separated from their wives. "Should we bring more slaves into the world?" The women, however, refused to give in to their husbands' despair. They took measures to convince their husbands to return to them, and ultimately received Divine recognition for their efforts (see Rashi to Shemos 38:8). Why did the men refuse to give birth, while the women insisted on bringing children into such a hostile environment?

Perhaps this stems from the male's need to be in control. Ever get lost? Who's the one who insists on figuring things out himself - and who immediately suggests asking for help, much to her partner's consternation? (Whoops - I gave it away.) As a rule, it is very difficult for a male to feel things are beyond his control. He has a need to be in charge, and it is natural for him to cease functioning in an environment where he feels he's lost control. So when things don't look good, man refuses to have children.

The female (and I realize I'm generalizing and perhaps stereotyping, and of course there are exceptions to every rule) by nature has no problem surrendering control. If she's lost, she'll ask for help. She continues to function and do what she has to, even when logic and circumstance dictate otherwise. It was Amram who separated from Yocheved, and not Yocheved who separated from Amram. And it was Miriam (and not Aaron, her brother) who encouraged her father to remarry. It was, the Midrash says, in the merit of the simple and pure faith of the righteous women that the Jewish nation was taken out from Egypt. Because if things were left up to the men, Pharaoh's decree would indeed have signalled the end of our people.

Perhaps, then, by combining the allegorical interpretation of the Be'er Yosef ("despite hidden secrets"), and the simple translation of Rashi ("and conquer it"), we can now understand why the Torah chose to communicate the male-only obligation to procreate by way of analogy to man's need to conquer, and woman's lack thereof. For women, there is no need for a special mitzvah to "be fruitful and multiply" even in the face of hardship, for due to their natural and unswerving faith, they will do so without being told. It is only for men, who have a need to conquer and be in control, that the Torah must go out of its way to stress his obligation to bear children regardless of the circumstances.

In a more general sense, "being fruitful and multiplying" refers to all our mitzvos. As Chazal put it, "the progeny of the righteous are their good deeds (see Rashi, beginning of next week's parsha)." We are told countless times, both in the written and the oral Torah, of the tremendous rewards for our good deeds. Yet sometimes we are left scratching our heads in shock, after witnessing righteous and pious individuals, the creme-de-la-creme of Klal Yisrael, being plucked from our midst, despite our heartfelt prayers, Tehillim, and good deeds. Is this the "reward" that Hashem meant? Why is G-d

doing this? How could it be? Are all our merits for naught? Especially in turbulent times such as these, it is difficult to keep the faintest seedlings of doubt from creeping into our hearts. How, indeed, is a Jew to respond in the face of such grief and pain? How can we understand world events? How can we explain the unexplainable?

By reminding ourselves of Yeshaya's poignant words: What business do you have among the hidden secrets of the Almighty? Do what you've been told to do, and Hashem will do as He sees fit to do! We were never promised we'd be able to understand. We grit our teeth, shed a tear, and recommit ourselves to Torah study and good deeds even more than before. And we leave the rest up to Hashem.

Have a good Shabbos.

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