

CHILDREN

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah is pro-family. It commands people to marry and have children. This week's parsha deals with the ritual laws of cleanliness and impurity inherent in giving birth to a child. Though the laws of purity and impurity have little consequence in our lives today due to the absence of the Temple and its rituals, there are certain laws regarding childbirth that still retain actuality today. But, I wish to dwell on the broader aspect of having children in this article. One of the main problems facing Jewish society today is demographic. Bluntly put, Jews are not reproducing themselves. In the United States, the statistics regarding Jewish births show that the birth rate is down to 1.8 - minus population growth, not just zero population growth. This is attributable to many factors - a large number of permanent singles, the declining birthrate that seemingly always accompanies economic affluence, people marrying later, women choosing careers over family, etc. Whatever the reasons, the numbers spell disaster for the future of American Jewry. And here in Israel, the birth rate among secular Jews is also spectacularly low. Compounding the problem is the high number of abortions undertaken by Jewish women every year, the numbers of these abortions being measured reportedly in the tens of thousands. There are wonderful organizations here in Israel that are committed to helping women in desperate straits give birth to their children instead of resorting to abortion. But in the overall picture these efforts are usually too little and too late.

We may be heartened by the fact that in the religious Jewish community there is currently a high birthrate, 7.6 in the Charedi society and 4.2 in the Dati society. Eventually, this will cause a vast change in the life, politics and behavior of our country. But for now, because more than fifty percent of the Charedi population and a third of the Dati population is under the age of eight, this is not recognizable. It should be apparent that there could be no Jewish people if there are not enough Jews to populate the nation and the Land of Israel. The Jewish people, sixty years after the Holocaust ended still has not made up its losses. In fact, it has not even come close. There were nineteen million Jews in the world in 1939. There are barely fourteen million Jews today. The price of Auschwitz, assimilation and intermarriage is very high. A shrinking base of Jewish population will spell the loss of Jewish influence and ideas in the world. And that would truly be a tragedy for all concerned.

The Lord told us in advance that we would not be a people of great numbers - "for you are the smallest of all nations." Nevertheless, we have an obligation to promote increased Jewish population and numbers. Family, children, generations, these are the values that Jews are judged by. It is our way of guaranteeing that the message of Sinai will continue to be heard in a world that so

desperately needs to hear it.

Shabat shalom.

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