

A Child-Centric Culture

When our shul decided to participate in the Yesh Tikva Infertility Awareness Shabbat, I didn't know we would be holding a Shalom Zachar last night and naming a baby this morning. But in a sense, that uncomfortable confluence is exactly why we are having this Shabbat.

So much of what we do as Jews celebrates children, and with good reason, but it can create a difficult environment for the approximately 17% of people who do not enjoy that happy mazal.¹

- We announce and celebrate births, shalom zachar and bris, simchat bat, and so on.
- We hold youth events, parent-child events, and school shabbatonim here in shul.
- In our homes, every Friday night we give our children berachot at the start of the meal, and we decorate our homes with pictures of/by our children
- On Simchat Torah we make children the focus of our dancing, we distribute candy, we call up the children for a cumulative kol hane'arim aliyah.
- On Purim our children dress up and go on parade.
- On Yom Tov we stand with our children for birkat kohanim.

Beyond our community activities, the Torah itself can be difficult for that 17% of people who are struggling to conceive; it can make them feel judged, and criticized.

- Look at our mitzvot:
 - Hashem's first berachah to humanity is פרו ורבו, that we should be able to produce children, and we count it as the Torah's first mitzvah.²
 - A gemara³ says that after a person leaves this world they will have to answer six questions, and one of them is whether they tried to produce children.
 - The Torah emphasizes mitzvot involving children, like והגדת לבנך and the four children of the Seder, and we daven for זרעך וזרעך זרעך, descendants who will carry on our masorah.
- Look at our stories:
 - The Torah describes righteous people who davened and cried for decades and then Hashem gave them children –Sarah/Avraham, Rivkah/Yitzchak, Rachel/Yaakov, Chanah/Elkanah – giving the impression that righteous people get happy endings.
 - And the Torah presents painfully difficult cases of people who are punished by Hashem by not having children,⁴ leading to the awful possibility that someone might take that personally, as a statement about their own situation. Even though a gemara explicitly states that having children is about mazal rather than merit,⁵ it's easy to lose sight of that one gemara in the shadow of so many other sources.
- Look at our own parshah, which begins “**When** a woman conceives, כִּי תִזְרֶיעַ” carrying a subtle message that conception ought to be inevitable.

Our cultural focus on children, and the Torah's messaging, can lead people who cannot conceive to feel both isolated and judged.

Of course, for similar reasons our culture can be hard for people who are single, or who are attracted to the same gender. They deserve a derashah too. But right now we're raising awareness about infertility, its challenges, and what we can do for people who are facing this.

¹ The statistic is from yeshtikva.org

² Bereishit 1:28; see Rashi to Bereishit 9:7 and Chinuch #1 as to whether 1:28 or 9:7 is the mitzvah.

³ Shabbat 31a

⁴ Such as Chiel who built up Yericho, and the general warnings of kareit

⁵ Moed Katan 28a, and see the meforshim there

ערב קבלן

Our communal focus on children is beautiful; I love holding Storytime for the kids. And our Torah is beautiful. But we need to do something, and the Torah insists we do something, for those who want to produce children and cannot. Not as tzedakah, not to be patronizing, but because we have a natural urge and a halachic imperative to alleviate others' pain.⁶

Here's a disconcerting fact: In most jurisdictions in North America, there is no requirement to take positive steps to help others, no "duty to rescue" someone from danger, unless you created the danger or you have some kind of special relationship of responsibility for them.⁷

The Torah is very different; it commands us explicitly *לא תעמוד על דם רעך*, it is a crime to stand by while someone else is in trouble. This mitzvah imposes on us an imperative to actively help.

- Beyond not taking other people's property, we must try to restore it to them.
- Beyond not causing others to stumble in sin, we have a mitzvah of *tochachah*,⁸ helping people to avoid sinning.

This duty is captured in the maxim, *כל ישראל ערביין זה לזה*, meaning that we are guarantors for each other. But not just any kind of guarantor. As Rav Baruch Ber explained in the name of Rav Chaim Brisker,⁹ we are a particular kind of guarantor, known as an *ערב קבלן*.

When someone borrows money, a standard *ערב*/guarantor becomes responsible to repay the debt only if the borrower defaults. It's really the borrower's responsibility, and the *ערב* agrees to backstop it if need be.

But an *ערב קבלן* is a different story. An *ערב קבלן* accepts the debt as his own, from the beginning. This person shares the burden. The lender can claim the money from the *ערב קבלן* even without demanding anything from the actual borrower!¹⁰ Rav Chaim contends that this is our relationship with each other; we accept their obligations and burdens as our own. We are truly *עם חבירו* בעול, נושא בעול, carrying the load alongside others.

סור מרע

Our first step in carrying that load is *סור מרע*, "Do no harm." Just as we are commanded not to harm people by taking their property, or by causing them to stumble in an *aveirah*, so we have a biblical law of *אונאת דברים*, not to say things which will hurt their feelings. This is the "do no harm" imperative.

Yesh Tikva has produced some practical suggestions to help us avoid *אונאת דברים* when dealing with people who are facing infertility. Here are four excerpts, you can find more online.¹¹ I apologize in advance because I think a lot of this is likely obvious to everyone here, but:

- First: Don't assume people are dealing with infertility, even if they have no children or there is a large gap between children. There are many possible factors.
- Second: Don't force the conversation. Let people who are dealing with infertility determine how and when to discuss their situation.
 - If they do share something, listen, offer a hug or any other gesture of love and support you both are comfortable with.
 - After they have shared their story, don't bring it up every time you see them. Play it by ear.

⁶ The Torah shows us the bad character of people who maligned women who could not give birth – Hagar to Sarah, Penina to Chanah. And the Torah shows us how desperately hurt Rachel was by her inability to have children, crying out to her husband Yaakov, *אם אין, מתי אנכי*, if I cannot have children then I will die. The mitzvah of *onaas devarim* prohibits us from speech which causes others pain – which our child-centric speech certainly can.

⁷ It's like that horror story in Florida in 2017, when five teenagers watched someone drown in a pond, laughing and even filming it instead of helping or calling 911. Under Florida law they could not be charged with failure to help. As the state prosecutor said, "Unfortunately, there is currently no statute in Florida law that compels an individual to render, request or seek aid for a person in distress."

⁸ *אפרושי מאיסורא*

⁹ See Rav Baruch Ber's *Hakdamah* to *ברוך בער* ר' ברוך וועררי, and see Rav Asher Weiss at

<https://minchasasher.com/he/shiur/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%94-%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%A2%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9D/%D7%92%D7%93%D7%A8-%D7%94%D7%A2%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%91%D7%9E%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%9F-%D7%95%D7%91%D7%9E%D7%A6%D7%95%D7%95%D7%AA-2/>.

¹⁰ See Choshen Mishpat 129:8, 129:15

¹¹ <https://yeshtikva.org>

- If you have experienced infertility yourself, it's ok to mention that a little and see if they take it further, but don't bring it up regularly
- Third: Don't try to show them that life isn't so bad. It's often better to listen and validate than to try to paint a rosier picture. Saying, "At least you have a spouse who loves you" can sound like diminishing the magnitude of their pain.
- Fourth: Don't give advice unless they ask for it. This includes advice on conceiving and certainly not asking them if they have considered adoption.

עשה טוב: Be an arev kablan

But to be an ערב קבלן means to move beyond that first step of doing no harm, to share the weight they carry on their shoulders to the extent possible, to embrace people who have felt isolated so that we are together with them, to make sure they are not alone, and to make sure they know they are not alone

Yesh Tikva offers advice on ways we can be an ערב קבלן, how we can reach out proactively to help people who are dealing with infertility. Again, these aren't magical new ideas:

- Ask to spend time with them, like going for a walk
- Check in from time to time, especially before Yom Tov, but in a way that allows them time and space to figure out how to respond, and even whether to respond. Maybe an email with the Subject line, "No reply expected."
- Invite them for a Shabbat or Yom Tov meal, making sure the company and conversation will be comfortable for everyone
- Invite them to your child's simchah, without pressuring them to attend if they decline the invitation.
- If you think it will be received well, offer them kvater at a brit, carrying in the baby, which is supposed to help people produce children, that's gracious. But ask them in private, in advance, and not in a pressured moment that morning, so that they can decide whether they want to do this.

Tefillah

Most of us are not in a position to solve someone's infertility, but we can help people who are dealing with it feel less isolated, as an ערב קבלן for them. And there is one more thing we can do: we can daven for them.

If you have names of people who are dealing with infertility and you can share them with me for my davening, please do. All of us can daven for others, every day. And we'll do that now, with a special tefillah on behalf of people who are trying to have children.¹²

¹² <https://yeshtikva.org/supporting-others/fertility-prayer/>