

Women's Issues

Childless or Childfree?

Rabbi Uri Cohen

(Dedicated to Nishmat's single and/or childless alumnae, in hopes God will answer their prayers)

Avraham and Sarah lived a long, long time without children. (He was eighty-six at Yishmael's birth, and she was ninety at Yitzchak's birth.) How should we understand that time? After all, endless sources in our tradition assume that being married and having children are essential for a fulfilling, normal life. <1>Being single and/or childless is so tragic that each state has been called *agunah*. <2>A childless person is considered dead. <3>Consequently, we might have expected the Torah to reflect negatively on the infertility that Sarah and Avraham shared. <4>Not only is that not the case, <5> but the Torah actually speaks positively of Avraham and Sarah's long lives, implying their years were all equally good! <6>How can this be?

Rabbi Dr. Zvi Schechter asks this question in his book of sermons, *Hed Zvi*, and answers as follows. The reason a childless person is considered dead is because they lack a link to the next generation to grant them posterity. However, Sarah and Avraham were different. On the phrase "the souls they made in Charan" (*Bereisheet* 12:5), Rashi cites the *midrash* that "They brought them under the wings of the *Shekhinah* -- Avraham converted the men, and Sarah converted the women -- and the Torah considers it as if they made them." Sarah and Avraham's job for all those years was to do *kiruv* and bring people closer to God, and by "creating" the next generation of *ba'alei teshuvah*, it was as if they had children. <7>In other words, *kiruv* can compensate for kidlessness. There's no reason to pity Avraham and Sarah -- or, for that matter, other *gedolim* (great leaders) such as the Chazon Ish (1878-1953), Sarah Schenirer (1883-1935), Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook (1891-1982), the Lubavitcher Rebbe (1902-1994), or Nehama Leibowitz (1905-1997), *zatzal* -- because their greatness in Torah teaching and leadership more than made up for their childlessness.

Singles and childless people, like all people with a disadvantage, need to be careful not to play the victim and wallow in self-pity. The Chafetz Chaim wrote a whole book for childless people, *Shem Olam*, because he was bothered by the hopelessness he encountered. <8>As Nishmat alumna Professor Susan Handelman states, in what is arguably the most important article on *frum* singles, "[T]he single woman also has a responsibility to give of herself, to develop whatever talents and skills God has given her, and not to withdraw, mope, and go to waste because she has not found a suitable partner, or because of social stigma. To take a small example, there is no reason why she herself cannot fulfill the *mitzvah* of hospitality and invite her married friends over for a Shabbos or Yom Tov meal. Of the 613 *mitzvot*, only a very few depend on one's marital status." <9>Being single or childless is no excuse. If anything, such people should focus on the advantages they do have over those who are married with children. <10>

What are the advantages of being single and/or childless?

To the extent that they feel an emptiness or loneliness in their lives, single and childless people may be better equipped than most to experience the existential insecurity which pushes people to seek God and increase their faith.<11>They may be drawn to pray more fervently than otherwise.<12>They may become more observant of *halakhah*.<13>A childless couple may grow closer to each other, whether because they focus on their relationship or because they go through difficult times together.<14>In the words of Rabbi Allen Schwartz, "The stories of the barrenness of the Matriarchs teach that such circumstances can serve to increase love and sensitivity between husband and wife. The sensitivity is best expressed by Elkanah to his barren wife Hannah, when he told her (*I Shmuel* 1:8), 'Why are you crying, why won't you eat and why is your heart bitter? Am I not better for you than ten sons?'"<15>

The biggest advantage of being childless is having a lot more freedom. As one *midrash* puts it, "When a woman has no children, she's free to come and go at all times to her mother's house or her relatives' house. When she gives birth to children, she won't have as much freedom to go out, and will stay at home."<16>A single person has even more freedom than a married childless person. In fact, the *mussar* classic *Chovot HaLevavot* believes there is a moral obligation to thank God for this freedom. In the context of telling everybody to accentuate the positive in their life, he spells out the details: "He should notice the absence of the heavy burdens and obligations [that accompany a spouse and children], and consider it one of the Creator's benefits to him. If he wants to pursue worldly things and needs [such as a career -- U.C.], his hard work will be much easier without a wife and children, and their loss is his gain and comfort. If he is concerned with the Next World [i.e., spiritual things], his mind will undoubtedly be clearer and freer because he's alone."<17>Cheer up, the *Chovot HaLevavot* is telling singles. You're not childless, you're childfree!<18>

What are the responsibilities of being single and/or childfree?

Professor Handelman points out that "Single women, for example, may have more free time to devote to communal endeavors... Women who are professionally trained and may work in the non-Jewish world also have much to offer when they volunteer their skills to Jewish organizations as lawyers, doctors, computer operators, administrators, researchers, and so forth."<19>Rabbi Aharon Feldman agrees, in writing to a celibate homosexual: "[Someone] who does not have a family can make serious contributions to Judaism which others cannot: for example, bringing Judaism to smaller communities where there are no facilities for raising a Jewish family. Activities involving much travel, such as fundraising (a vital aspect of Jewish survival), are best accomplished by someone who is not tied down to a family. I know of a homosexual who helped establish several important institutions through his fundraising. Even within one's community, devotion to public causes can be more easily done by someone who has no family obligations. Several individuals whom I know became respected, active members of their communities during their lifetimes, even though it was well-known that they had no interest in marriage."<20>Along the same lines, Professor Handelman continues, "[H]istorically,

unmarried women deeply committed to Judaism have made extraordinary accomplishments in this area. The case of Sarah Schenirer, of course, is an outstanding example of a devoted, unmarried Jewish woman who saved an entire generation of Jewish women for Judaism in Europe before World War II, and who erected an educational system for women that today is the foundation of religious communities all over the world (the Bais Yaakov schools).^{<21>} And let us not forget Schvester Selma of Shaarei Tzedek Hospital in Jerusalem, who exemplified nursing as a lofty form of *chessed* for three-quarters of a century."^{<22>}

How can one gain posterity without children?

This question was first addressed in *Tanakh*! In the *haftarah* we read on public fast days, Yishayahu speaks powerfully to the childless: "Let not the eunuch say, 'I'm a withered tree!' God answers, 'As for the eunuchs who keep my Shabbatot, who have chosen what I desire and keep hold of My covenant -- I will give them, in My House and within My walls, *yad vashem* (a monument and name) **better than sons or daughters**! I will give them *shem olam* (an eternal name) which will never be cut off.'"^{<23>} Based on his interpretation of this reassurance, the Chafetz Chaim promises infertile people that they can achieve posterity through keeping Shabbat, doing *chessed* (kind acts), and learning and supporting Torah.^{<24>}

The *Midrash Tanchuma* reassures the childless in a similar way. "Rabbi Yehudah the Levite said: When a person leaves this world without children, he feels bad and cries. God says to him, 'Why are you crying? Is it because you did not bear fruit in this world? You have fruit that's **better than children**!' He asks, 'Master of the Universe, what fruit did I bear?' God replies, 'The Torah...' Similarly, a person's 'offspring' are his good deeds. As it says (*Bereisheet* 6:9), 'These are the offspring of Noach: Noach was righteous and honest.'"^{<25>} Rabbi Yisroel Greenwald of Melbourne cites this *midrash* and adds, "Because the physically childless perform their life mission under superhuman conditions, their reward likewise transcends the physical world... Whereas the barren may not have physical children, they are by no means childless. Parents who are physically childless bring down souls from heaven just as their friends who push strollers do. These spiritual children are created through their parents' steadfast service to Hashem, despite their constant indescribable pain and humiliation. Such souls are so lofty they cannot be contained in a corporeal form, which is why the prophet says they are 'better than sons and daughters' -- they are greater than their physical counterparts. Each such spiritual child ... equals tens of thousands of physical children born with flesh and blood."^{<26>}

Other statements by *Chazal* suggest that childless people can compensate by providing for the Torah education or *brit milah* of other people's children. "Whoever teaches someone else's child Torah is considered as if he had given birth to him."^{<27>} "Rabbi Tanchuma opened with the verse, 'Who acted early for Me? I will reward him! Everything under Heaven is Mine' (*Iyov* 41:3). This refers to a single man who lives in a big city, and who pays the salary of children's Torah and *halakhah* teachers. God says, 'I will pay him his reward, and give him a son.'^{<28>} ... Who circumcised before I gave them a son? Who made Me a *ma'akeh* (protective railing) before I gave them a roof? Who made Me a

mezuzah before I gave them a house? Who made Me a *sukkah* before I gave them a place? Who made Me a *lulav* before I gave them money? Who made Me *tzitzit* before I gave them a *tallit*?"<29> Rabbi Schwartz comments, "An analysis of this *midrash* leads to a startling conclusion. The *midrash* refers to a man who can't fulfill the *mitzvot* of *tzitzit* and *mezuzah* yet helps others to do so. He also can't fulfill the obligation of procreating, and yet teaches the children of others Torah! To be consistent, the *midrash* should have had him somehow assisting in the process of birth as a doctor or supporter.<30> This source teaches once again that the teaching of Torah to children is in some way a fulfillment of *pru urvu* (be fruitful and multiply)."<31>

A later authority, the *Pele Yoetz*, gives other suggestions. First of all, a childless person may not give up and declare herself a withered tree, because there may still be hope for children. Even if, after major efforts, it is as clear as the midday sun that she can't give birth, that's still no reason to feel bad. The real reason for wanting children should not be a personal desire [for posterity] or for heirs, but rather the fulfillment of what God wants. Since she wanted to do the *mitzvah* but couldn't because of *oness* (it was out of her control), the Torah considers it as if she did fulfill it (*Berakhot* 6a) and she will be appropriately rewarded. So she should be happy with what she's got. Nevertheless, it's a good idea for her to acquire a good "name better than sons or daughters." She can raise an orphan in her home, or help provide poor children with a Torah education; then it will be as if she gave birth to them.<32> Alternatively, if she provides for a *talmid chakham's* monetary needs, it's as if he's her son.<33> Finally, a childless person can "procreate" with Torah [as Sarah and Avraham did -- U.C.], by originating new Torah thoughts, writing books, or raising up many students. They can be "the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, in which to take pride" (*Yishayahu* 60:21).<34> This last approach is that of Avraham and Sarah and the other childless *gedolim* mentioned above.

Is there a purpose to being single or childless?

Ultimately, we cannot know God's reasons for what happens to us. Certainly, those who are not undergoing difficulties must not try to justify God's ways to the people who are suffering; that would very likely make them feel bad, violating the prohibition of *ona'at devarim* (hurting people's feelings).<35> However, the sufferers themselves may be able to deal with their pain if they find meaning in it. Specifically, the singles and childless may feel better if they can theorize what God's purpose may be in their case.<36>

A few answers appear in the *midrash* to explain Avraham and Sarah's infertility. The answer most often quoted is that God wanted them to pray for children. Another is that God wanted them to spend their prime years without the burdens created by children.<37> We can shed light on this second answer with the following modern source. In *Ozna'im LeTorah*, Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin (1881-1966) states, "I found [a source that says] the Patriarchs and Matriarchs were infertile **so that** they would be free to bring people under the wings of the *Shekhinah*. Only in their old age, when they'd fulfilled this obligation, were children born to them... [On *Bereisheet* 11:30, 'Sarai was infertile and had no child,' the *midrash* proposes that she didn't even have a womb.] This means she didn't have one bit of hope to give birth in the natural course of

events. Consequently, she was completely *moseret nefesh* (she put in everything she had) into the holy work [of *kiruv*]. In her old age, God changed her nature and she had a son."<38>I found this radical idea in two other contemporary sources, one a rabbi and one a child. Rabbi Moshe Zuriel, former *mashgiach ruchani* of Yeshivat Sha'alvim, writes, "Finally at age 32, R. Zevi Yehuda [Kook] married. One can imagine his father's pain that his only son had no children. This would seem to have been from heaven, **so that** this great man would be able to devote his attention undividedly to his thousands of students."<39>In a different context, a first grader named Yehudis commented to her childless teacher, "Hashem just didn't give you children yet because He wants you to teach us."<40>This is worth thinking about.

I'd like to conclude with this inspiring idea from a childless woman: "The Torah doesn't say be fruitful via multiplication, but rather it seems like two separate commandments. Be fruitful and multiply. Applying it to us [singles and childless people], we should bear in mind that we can and should be fruitful even though we are not yet 'multiplying.' We should make the most of ourselves as spouses, as siblings, as children of parents, as employees/employers and as members of society. In the merit of being the best we can be, may Hashem grant us our most fervent wishes."<41>

NOTES

1. See Dr. Yoel Jakobovits, "The Longing for Children in a Traditional Jewish Family," in Dr. Richard V. Grazi, ed. *Be Fruitful and Multiply: Fertility Treatment and the Jewish Tradition* (Jerusalem: Genesis Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 5-11.

2. Rabbi Levi, in the *Midrash Tanchuma (Acharei Mot 6)*, states that Nadav and Avihu's sin was "They were very arrogant, and would say, 'Which woman is fitting for us?' Many *agunot* [i.e., single women] sat and waited for them." Rabbi Elazar haKallir writes that on Rosh Hashanah, Sarah was "sealed with righteousness that she no longer be an *agunah* [i.e., childless]." This *piyut*, which starts "*Im asher b'tzedek*," appears in *shacharit* of Rosh Hashanah, on p. 318 of the ArtScroll *machzor* and p. 221 of the Birnbaum edition. (I recognize that the *piyut* does not agree with my point about Sarah.) Some *midrashim* call infertile women *azuvot* (abandoned) or *aluvot* (wretched); see Dr. Yael Levine Katz, "*HaAkrut BaAgadah*," *Teudah* vol. 13 (1997), p. 83 and p. 106.

3. *Nedarim* 64b.

4. According to *Yevamot* 64a, Avraham and Sarah and Yitzchak and Rivkah were all infertile.

5. Compare this line from a poignant list of guidelines how to interact with an infertile couple: "[D]on't make the couple feel inferior or that they're being punished by God. (Remember: Abraham and Sarah couldn't bear a child until their old age!)" The piece is called "A Family of Two," and appears in *Mail-Jewish*, 7:23 (7 May 1993); available at http://www.otmall.com/mj_ht_arch/v7/mj_v7i23.html#CDQ. Dr. Lisa Aiken, *Why Me, God? A Jewish Guide for Coping with Suffering* (Northvale, N.J.: Aronson, 1996) also

has recommendations on how to help singles (pp. 77-79) and childless people (pp. 101-103).

6. On *Bereisheet* 25:8, "Avraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented," *Radak* comments that he had goodness and honor all his days. Rashi reads *Bereisheet* 23:1 to mean that Sarah's years were all equally good. The *Midrash Lekach Tov* on *Bereisheet* 23:1 says that Sarah "spent all her years in *simchah* and *sasson* (happiness and joy)." I am indebted to Levine Katz, p. 110, for this reference.

7. Rabbi Dr. Zvi Schechter, *Hed Zvi* (Tel Aviv, 1971), vol. 1, p. 162.

8. The Chafetz Chaim writes in his introduction to *Shem Olam*, "Several times in my earthly days, I've seen people who didn't succeed in having children, who walk with stooped souls and are sad all their life. They say, 'What's the point of my life? I'm like a withered tree, I'll soon die and be cut off from the world, and my name will be wiped out of the world of the living -- my name will never be mentioned again!'" See below for the Chafetz Chaim's response.

9. Professor Susan Handelman, "Stranger in a Strange Land," in Sarah Shapiro, ed. *Our Lives*, vol. 1 (Southfield, MI: Targum/Feldheim, 1991), p. 102; available at <http://www.shemayisrael.co.il/publicat/lives/lives7.htm>. Cf. Rabbi Yisroel Miller, *Guardian of Eden* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1993), p. 164: "Family-building is one of life's great achievements, but it is not part of the outline of our daily forty-*mitzvah* structure, and single men and women are certainly not deprived of opportunities for personal exploration of the soul." Cf. Aiken, p. 71: "It takes a lot of emotional and spiritual work to transcend the frequent disappointment and loneliness of being single. One way of avoiding destructive self-absorption is by taking care of others instead of thinking only about ourselves."

10. Cf. Name Withheld, "The Childless Need Not Be Poor" (Letter to the Editor), *The Jewish Observer*, March 1990, p. 57: "A *ba'alas teshuvah* once asked me how many children I have and when I told her that I didn't have any, her reply was: 'Wow, you must really be special because *Hashem* made your situation different from everyone else.'"

11. In the words of Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition*, Summer 1965, p. 7, "I despair because I am lonely and, hence, feel frustrated. On the other hand, I also feel invigorated because this very experience of loneliness presses everything in me into the service of God." Cf. Professor Sara R. Horowitz, "A Wakeful Heart: Thoughts on Rosh Hashanah," *Kerem* #4 (Winter 1995-96), pp. 42-43: "I am reminded of the assertion of the Jerusalem Torah scholar and teacher, Avivah Zornberg, that Abraham saw himself as childless even after the birth of Isaac and Ishmael... She notes the linguistic relation between the Hebrew word for "childless" (*ariri*) and the word for "awake" (*er*), and links the condition of childlessness to the condition of wakefulness... Abraham, as I imagine him, did not think of himself as *literally* childless... But he felt unsure of the ultimate meaningfulness of his life. He felt *ariri* -- childless, solitary, alone -- the way each of us, regardless of the satisfactions and

successes in our lives, is ultimately alone with ourselves and with God. And this feeling, *ariri*, kept him *er*, awake, alert... In this light, childlessness comes to represent not deprivation, but the very condition of our being."

12. According to *Yevamot* 64a and *Bereisheet Rabbah* 45:4 (the first opinion), the Patriarchs and Matriarchs were infertile because God desired their prayers. Compare Anonymous, "Childlessness: A Source of Strength" (Letter to the Editor), *The Jewish Observer*, December 1989, p. 51: "God longs for *tefillos*. Through them we can develop a close and deep relationship with the Creator. One can feel a sense of warmth and care when one listens and hears a voice saying, 'Listen, my dear, dear child, I'm doing what is best for you. Do you want Me to give you something not in your best interest?' And we can answer back in our *tefillos* -- '*Hashem*, please send me children. But if You don't, I know that this is what is best for me. Please give me the strength to withstand this test.'"

13. Aiken, p. 91.

14. "Infertility has the potential of uniting a couple, because the spouses really need to rely on each other for support and comfort;" see Dr. Sara Barris (infertility psychologist), interviewed in *ATIME Newsletter*, #23 (Pesach 5760). Available at <http://www.atime.org/ATIME%2023.htm#INTERVIEW28>. (ATIME, which stands for A Torah Infertility Medium of Exchange, is a support group for frum infertile couples.) Aiken, p. 91, agrees. On the other hand, "The love between a husband and wife is strengthened and deepened with the birth of a child," according to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Torah and Humility," available at www.vbm-torah.org/archive/humility.htm.

15. Rabbi Allen Schwartz, "A Rabbinic Response to Infertility," in *Grazi*, p. 43. The traditional commentators assume Elkanah is referring to his love for Hannah.

16. *Bereisheet Zuta* (29:35). I am indebted to Levine Katz, p. 107, for this reference.

17. Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda, *Chovot HaLevavot* (circa 1040), *sha'ar habitachon*, chapter 4, *s.v. aval*. (I am indebted to Rabbi Miller, *op. cit.*, for this reference.) He continues by citing approvingly the practice of prophets and ascetics to leave their families for long periods of solitude. The same approval appears in Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam, *HaMaspik LeOvdei Hashem, perek al haperishut, s.v. va'asher*. Rabbi Avraham cites the Talmud's rhetorical question, "Can one engross himself in Torah with a millstone around his neck?" (*Kiddushin* 29b), and advises wannabe ascetics to start early, before they have a spouse and children to interfere with their religious growth. He also notes that Ya'akov married at age eighty-three and that Eliyahu and Elisha never did.

18. Cf. this proclamation from The Childfree-By-Choice Pages (<http://www.childfree.net>) -- "We consider ourselves childFREE - free of the loss of personal freedom, money, time and energy that having children requires." Carole Shamula, "Single, Syrian-Jewish Female Seeks... Solitude," *Forward*, August 11, 2000, p. 21, writes: "My married friends may not want to be in my place. Yet, at times they wish they could have my freedom."

19. Handelman, p. 101. Cf. Anonymous, *op. cit.*: "It is important for our peace of mind to be busy -- and we have the time to involve ourselves in *chessed* and *tzorchei tzibbur* (communal undertakings), which our peers wish they would have...Such are the treasures of the childless rich."

20. Rabbi Aharon Feldman, "A Personal Correspondence," *Jewish Action* 58:3 (Spring 1998), p. 69. He prefaces these remarks, "Can a homosexual be expected to live as a celibate? I believe a Jewish homosexual can accomplish this if he decides that the Jewish people is his 'wife and children.' It is possible to do this if he throws his every spare moment into devotion to the welfare of his people." Compare this quote from Francis Bacon (1561-1626): "Certainly the best works, and of greatest merit for the public, have proceeded from the unmarried or childless men; which both in affection and means have married and endowed the public;" Francis Bacon, *Essays*, chapter 8: "Of Marriage and Single Life" (1597). Available at <http://www.bartleby.com/3/1/8.html>.

21. Cf. Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, "A Mother in Israel," *Jewish Action* 57:4 (Summer 1997), p. 48: "But what about childless or single women, who do not have the traditional maternal function? The answer to this question was provided by Sarah Schenirer, who, like the prophetess Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel (*Shoftim* 5:7)...Much of the Torah world today is due to the untiring efforts of this childless divorcee, who founded the Bais Yaakov movement and established Torah education for women. Although Sarah Schenirer did not have any biological children, thousands of families are her spiritual children. The men who attend *daf yomi* and the students in the yeshivos are there because, thanks to her efforts, wives and mothers appreciate the value of Torah study."

22. Handelman, *op. cit.*

23. *Yishayahu* 56:3-5. Rabbi Feldman, *op. cit.*, suggests that the prophet is addressing celibate homosexuals (as well as heterosexual singles and childless people, presumably).

24. His book *Shem Olam* elaborates on this promise. Interestingly, in his masterpiece on helping people (*Ahavat Chessed*, section 2, chapter 5), the Chafetz Chaim cites *Bava Batra* 9b ("Whoever is in the habit of doing *tzedakah* will merit children who have wisdom, wealth, etc.") and comments wryly that he's surprised at people who spend their money and effort on *segulot* (charms) to have children; it would be better to follow the *segulah* from *Chazal* of being involved with *tzedakah*. Not only does it often work, but even if (God forbid) a person never has children, the acts of *tzedakah* will remain her "offspring" (see *Tanchuma* in the next paragraph). I am indebted to Rabbi Yehoshua Zev Zond, *Birkat Banim: BeInyanei Poriyut URefuah BeHalakhah* (Jerusalem, 1994), p. 7 for this reference.

25. *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Noach* 2).

26. Rabbi Yisroel Greenwald, "The Book of *Rus* -- An Ode to the 'Ordinary' Life," *Moadim Uzmanim: A Journal of Torah Thought and Halacha for the Yomim Tovim*, II:V (Sivan 5761). Available at <http://www.shemayisrael.com/shavous/rus.htm>. (He bases this

idea on Rabbi Moshe Sofer, *Chiddushei Chatam Sofer*, Niddah 13b, s.v. *ein*.) Rabbi Greenwald continues with a long quote from Rabbi Aaron (Reb Areleh) Roth, *Shomer Emunim*, p. 79, to the effect that every single time a person suffers pain (e.g., from singlehood or childlessness) and accepts it without anger at God, they "give birth" to another one of these spiritual children.

27. *Sanhedrin* 19b. Infertility expert Rabbi Aron Shmuel Jacobowitz uses this statement as a proof for his opinion that "Does the concept of infertility exist by Jewish couples? My answer is an emphatic NO! Every Jewish [person] is fertile even if he is not a parent. Every single *neshamah* (soul) is fertile and its children are the *mitzvot* that we do." See "Interview with Rabbi Jacobowitz," *ATIME Newsletter*, Chanukah 5761/Winter 2000. Available at http://www.atime.org/newsletters_pg/Chanukah5761/interview.html.

28. *Chazal* assumed that most people wanted a son rather than a daughter. Today, though, most people are just as happy at the birth of a daughter as a son. For the halachic implications, see Rabbi Ephraim Halivni, "Yaldah Bat, Mai Mevarekh," *HaDarom* 65 (1996), pp. 20-22.

29. *Vayikra Rabbah* 27:2. The implication is that God should bless them with what they lack, in the merit of their having helped others do the *mitzvah* despite that lack.

30. In commenting on the heroic Hebrew midwives in Egypt (*Shemot* 1:15-21), Rabbi Shmuel David Luzzatto ("Shadal," 1800-1865) suggests that the custom was for childless women to volunteer as midwives. If they couldn't give birth themselves, at least they could help other women give birth.

31. Rabbi Schwartz, p. 44.

32. *Sanhedrin* 19b: "Whoever raises an orphan in his house is considered as if he had given birth to him."

33. This is based on *Sanhedrin* 19b as well.

34. Rabbi Eliezer Pappo (1785-1828), *Pele Yoetz*, the end of s.v. *piryah v'rivyah*. In paraphrasing, I switched the gender from male to female, to fit most of the readership of this *devar torah*. (I am indebted to Rabbi Zond, p. 49 for this reference.) Interestingly, Rabbi Zvi Elimelekh Shapiro of Dinov (1783-1841), the Chassidic rebbe best known as the author of *Bnei Yisas'char*, boldly claims that the main fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *pru urvu* is not by physically giving birth to children (which can be done only a limited number of times), but rather by mentally "giving birth" to new thoughts in Torah (which can be done all the time). See his *Derekh Pikudekha*, *mitzvah* 1, #26, and his *Ma'ayan Ganim* commentary on Rabbi Yosef Ya'avetz' book *Ohr HaChayim*, chapter 15, #1.

35. See Rabbi Yosef Karo, *Shulchan Arukh*, *Choshen Mishpat*, 228:4.

36. For example, Aiken's friend Sandy suggests to her (p. 72), "Don't focus on what you haven't gotten from dating. Think about how many people you've influenced. Maybe you are single because God wants you to teach or influence men [whom you date]. If you weren't single you wouldn't date them and wouldn't affect them. Think about all of the men whose lives you've touched."

37. *Bereisheet Rabbah* 45:2, as understood by *Matnot Kehunah on Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 2:32. A third answer, which appears in two variations in the *midrash*, is that God wanted each husband and wife to preserve their original loving relationship, so He kept their bodies in their youthful, pre-childbirth state. I'm not sure how to relate to this answer.

38. Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, *Ozna'im LeTorah*, vol. 1, p. 89. Nishmat staff member Rav Eliyahu Yedid cites this in his *Arba Imahot veEim haMelukhah* (Jerusalem, 1997), p. 19. Cf. Judy Klitsner, "Childlessness and Prayer in the Bible," *The Pardes Reader* (Jerusalem: Pardes, 1997), p. 52: "[Sarah] seems to have made peace with her childlessness, to the extent that she found the very suggestion of childbearing to be absurd (*Bereisheet* 18:12). By the time we reach the joyous resolution of Sarah's prolonged years of infertility, we find that God had never directly promised her a child, nor had she ever directly asked for one."

39. Rabbi Moshe Zuriel, "A Son -- The Leg of His Father," *Orot Newsletter*, 2:3 (January-March 1992), p. 3.

40. It appears in "From A Child's View," *ATIME Newsletter*, Chanukah 5761/Winter 2000. Available at http://www.atime.org/newsletters_pg/Chanukah5761/child.html.

41. "A Tu B'Shvat Thought," *Ibid*. Available at http://www.atime.org/newsletters_pg/Chanukah5761/daily_prayer.html.

“There has never been as many childless women in America as there are now,” Wright explained, citing from the US Census Bureau. According to this data, collected in 2014, over 40% of the “roughly 75 million women age 15 to 50 in 2014” are not currently mothers. This, according to Notkin, is an important issue feminism has yet to fully address. Daum, author of four books and editor of the much-discussed new anthology *Selfish, Shallow & Self-Absorbed: Sixteen Writers On The Decision To Not Have Children*, concurs that the question of “having it all” has had negative consequences on women’s lives. It shouldn’t matter if a woman is childless by chance or childfree by choice—all women deserve to feel socially accepted. Then, 35 percent of women of fertile age were childless. Today, that number is 49 percent. Still, it’s often assumed that all adult women are mothers, as if we’ve inverted the “W” for woman to the “M” for mother. And while the majority of women do eventually give birth, it’s later than ever. For the first time, more than half (54%) of American women aged 25-29 are childless, as are nearly a third (31%) of women aged 30 to 34. Magazine cover stories and news articles tout the so-called “childfree” life, assuming all childless women have chosen this fate, waving some sort of feminist flag. But the truth is, these women are not “free” of the children they yearn for. Motherhood is a burden that we would give anything to bear.