

Infertility afflicts a number of women in the Torah and the TaNaKh: Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel in the stories we are reading now; Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel; Manoah's unnamed wife, the mother of Samson; and the anonymous Shunamite Woman, the wealthy patron of the prophet Elisha. Although only men are obligated to procreate (prooftext: Jacob is commanded in Genesis 35:11 to: "Be fertile and increase;"), it is usually the woman who suffers the most when a marriage remains childless. Last week it was Isaac and Rebekah who had to wait for many years until their children were born, and this week it is Jacob's beloved wife Rachel who cannot conceive, and both women are despondent. The Talmud discusses multiple aspects of infertility, with the woman usually seen as the infertile partner. However, their midrashim do occasionally also implicate the man. For example, they find both Isaac and Rebekah infertile and attribute Rebekah's pregnancy to their both having prayed. Midrash Genesis Rabbah 63 teaches that Rebekah did not have a uterus until HaShem fashioned one for her, while Tractate Yevamot 64a informs us that "Isaac knew he was infertile, and therefore there was no reason for him to marry another woman, as Rebekah was not the cause of their infertility." It goes on to say that it was finally Isaac's prayers that moved HaShem to act on their behalf: "... because the prayer of a righteous individual who is the son of a righteous individual is not similar to the prayer of a righteous individual who is the son of a wicked individual, and Rebekah's father was the wicked Bethuel." And they explain the infertility of our forefathers (and mothers) thus: "Because the Holy One of Blessing desires the prayers of the righteous, and He therefore wanted them to pray for children. ... just as this pitchfork turns over produce from one place to another, so the prayer of the righteous turns over the attributes of the Holy One of Blessing from the attribute of rage to the attribute of mercy." From this we can understand Rachel's statement when she finally bears Joseph: "... and she said, 'God has taken away my reproach.'" (30:23) After all, Bethuel was her grandfather and her father was his devious son Lavan. Alas, in discussing the obligation of all men to procreate, this tractate rules that if a marriage remains childless after ten years, the man must take another wife in order to produce children. They derive this ruling from the examples of Sarah, Rachel, and even the extremely fertile Leah, who offer their handmaids to their husbands, as well as from Hannah's fertile co-wife Peninah. The prooftext for reckoning ten years is Genesis 16:3: "So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years, and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine." In the polygynous ancient world, women were simply expected to share their husbands with a woman who was able to provide children for the marriage. This is quite logical considering the high rate of maternal and infant mortality, as well as the necessity, especially in agrarian societies, for children to share the work and ultimately support their parents during the infirmities of old age. Sadly, this ruling is still in place in a few ultra-orthodox communities, as the 1999 movie "Kadosh" poignantly illustrates: A happily married couple, but childless couple is forced apart after ten years, and even though the wife has learned that her husband is sterile, she is powerless to take action because fertility tests are forbidden. Yevamot 64a goes on to teach that "A man who does not engage in procreation is liable to death, as it is stated regarding the sons of Aaron: 'And Nadav and Avihu died ... and they had no children [Numbers 3:4].' Others say: He causes the Divine Presence to depart from the Jewish people, as it is stated: 'To be a God to you and to your seed after you.' [Genesis 17:7]. ... If your seed is not after you, upon whom can the Divine Presence rest? Upon wood and stones?" Consequently, after ten years, a childless marriage must be dissolved, or the husband must take an additional wife. The rabbis of the Talmud, whose knowledge of human (and animal) physiology is limited and its application deeply flawed and often outrageously fanciful, do have at least a modicum of sympathy for the woman. Yevamot 64b rules that, "if a man divorced his wife after ten years without children, she is permitted to marry a second man, who may remain married to her for ten years. ... A second husband, yes, but a third one, no. Once she has been married to two men without children for ten years each, it is presumed that she is unable to have children." Fair enough, but there are successful challenges. Later, a ruling in 65a informs us that if a husband and wife are in the process of divorce and each blames the other for their childlessness, the wife is to be believed, because "She is certain whether his semen shoots like an arrow, whereas he is not certain whether his semen shoots like an arrow." Even with no inkling of how sperm and egg unite to produce another being, those rabbis at least refrain from putting the entire onus on the woman, and also exhibit sympathy for the status to which not only they, but nearly all of their world, have relegated her. After all, in Yevamot 65b they rule in favor of a brave woman who asserts, "Does this woman not require a staff for her hand and a hoe for her burial?" Midrash Genesis Rabbah explains that Rachel is free from reproach because "Until the woman bears a child, the sin is attributed to her, after she bears a child, it is attributed to her child. Who ate this item? It is your son. Who broke this item? It is only your son." Although the potential for humor was likely unnoticed, we can smile a bit at the thought of a wife finally having someone to blame for her mistakes – even as we also remember that later, Joseph will end up making quite a few mistakes of his own, largely resulting from the mistakes of his doting father. Among its many lessons, the stories of our forefathers and foremothers are eloquent warnings to practice wise parenting after successfully overcoming infertility.

Shabbat shalom!