

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

goes to speak to God to figure out what is going on (Gen 25:21-23). This trope repeats itself in the story of Hannah at the beginning of the book of Samuel.

However, if we look a bit more carefully we can see that not all women saw pregnancy as a reward. In the story of the Shunammite Woman in the book of II Kings (4:11-17) we are told that she has no children but it is Gehazi and the prophet Elisha who decide to reward her with a child. She herself pushes back several times and says basically that she is fine without a child.

Sara, unlike Rachel, Rivka or even Leah, never expresses any desire for a child. When she is told she will have one she laughs (Gen 18:12). If she had been pining her whole life for a child her reaction would have been different, perhaps she would have smiled or burst into tears of joy. Instead, she laughs. The Talmud in Yevamot (64b) claims that Sara the matriarch was an *aylonit*, that is a woman who never reached sexual maturity and therefore could not bear a child. This is partly a way for the Rabbis to highlight the miraculous nature of the birth of Yitzhak but it can also give us an opportunity to think about the event from Sara's perspective. Perhaps she had always understood herself as someone who would not have children and suddenly that part of her identity shifted and she laughed in discomfort and shock.

While the parashah of Sotah contains the popular assumption that all women want babies, there is precedent in the Bible to think about women who might not. The relationship between this woman and her husband may very well have deteriorated at this point and it is not hard to imagine that this woman might not want to be pregnant at all, such that the "good" part of the ceremony could be just as "bad" as the bad part.

In light of current events regarding reproductive rights, it is critical that we bear in mind the simple truth that society cannot make assumptions that it is better for a woman to be pregnant than not to be pregnant. Only a woman herself, with her own perspective on her body and circumstances, can determine whether a pregnancy is wanted or not and whether it should continue. This week's parashah falls short in asking this woman what she wants but it gives us an opportunity to do better, to ask and to listen and to accept the authority of women over their own bodies.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Naso

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Annual (Numbers 4:21-7:89): Etz Hayim p. 791; Hertz p. 586
Triennial (Numbers 7:1-89): Etz Hayim p. 805; Hertz p. 596
Haftarah (Judges 13:2-25): Etz Hayim p. 813; Hertz p. 602

D'var Torah: What Women Want

Rabbi Shoshana Cohen, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Parshat Naso contains the detailed Sotah ordeal, the law of the "wayward woman." This title is a bit of a misnomer since the ritual is performed in a situation where the husband is gripped by a spirit of jealousy. Unsure whether his wife has strayed or not, he brings her to the Temple so that she can endure a harrowing ritual meant not only to ascertain her guilt or innocence but also to assuage his feelings of jealousy. If during the ritual the woman is proven guilty then her insides, perhaps a reference to her womb, will grotesquely fall. If however, she is innocent then that womb will be filled with a child - she will become pregnant. This dichotomy lies at the foundation of this conception of sexuality and femaleness. No one actually asks this woman what happened - the ordeal will tell whether she has strayed. And if she hasn't she receives pregnancy as a reward - also without anyone asking whether that is what she wants.

Throughout Biblical literature, the overarching assumption is that women want nothing more than to become pregnant. Almost all of our matriarchs have difficulty becoming pregnant (they are "barren" in the words of the Bible.) The majority of these women are bothered greatly by this fact. Rachel cries to Yaakov that she will die without a child (Gen 30:1), Yitzhak prays on behalf of Rivka when she has trouble conceiving and she herself

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D'var Haftarah: To Speak with Angels

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The Tanakh is full of stories of barren women who miraculously give birth after divine intervention. Infertility was a problem which troubled biblical heroes just as it troubles couples today. While biblical stories tend to remedy this malady through miraculous means, using these stories as an opportunity to illustrate divine mercy and providence, they frequently also use them to examine the interplay of the individuals involved, husband and wife, as they tackle this challenge to their relationship.

The annunciation story of the birth of Samson bears elements of this dramatic (and traumatic) tension: “And there was a man from Zorah from the clan of the Danite, and his name was Manoah. And his wife was barren, she had no children. And a messenger of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, ‘Look, pray, you are barren and have born no child.’” (verses 2-3) This laconic pronouncement, delivered to Manoah’s anonymous wife, places the onus for the couple’s infertility clearly on her shoulders.

In pre-modern times, the assessment of the cause of this problem was never simple and its resolution, when it happened, was often nothing short of miraculous. In a rabbinic midrash, some sages, aware that in such cases there is often a “blame game”, use the dialogue between the angel and Manoah’s wife as a means to explore the very human interaction of spouses contending with such a problem:

There was a dispute between Manoah and his wife. He claimed that she was barren and that she was the reason they were childless and she claimed that he was impotent and that he was the reason they were childless... Manoah’s wife was a righteous woman (*tzadeket*) [and on account of this] she merited to speak with the angel and to bring peace to her relationship with her husband and to [have him] inform her that she was barren and that **she** prevented the pregnancy and not her husband. (adapted from Bemidbar Rabbah 10:5)

While it is easy to look at this midrash and its attempt to place the onus of blame on Manaoh’s wife as a means for protecting male honor, it might also be significant to note how the gift of prophecy is given to someone who willingly takes upon themselves the burden of making peace in a particularly difficult and “charged” setting. The hero (or heroine in this

case) then, is the one displays great strength and fortitude in taking it upon themselves to defuse an explosive situation.

Parashat Naso Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

We are approaching the end of the material regarding the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), holiness, and purity, concluding with the inauguration of the Mishkan, or as the Torah calls it, *Chanukat Hamizbe’ach*.

- 1) 3 types of impurities are listed as having to be sent away from the camp: those who have Tzara’at, those who have certain bodily discharges, and those who have been in contact with a corpse (5:1-4). Why do you think that this instruction comes now, between the discussion of the jobs of the Levites, personnel procedures in the Mishkan, and the inauguration of the Mishkan?
- 2) 5:11-31 lays out the procedure for a woman whose husband suspects that she broke faith with him (*Sotah*). What do you think is the reality of the life of a couple where the husband decides to subject his wife to such an ordeal?
- 3) At the end of the *Sotah* ordeal, it is stated that “the man should be clear of guilt” (5:31). What might the man be guilty of?
- 4) A person who takes an oath to become a Nazir may not cut his hair until the end of the period for which he took the oath (6:5, 18). What role does hair play in our image, and what might motivate a person to willingly tamper with this physical attribute?
- 5) At the inauguration of the Mishkan, each head of a tribe brought (identical) gifts to the Mishkan (7:12-83), each one having his own day when only he brought the gifts. Why do you think that a full day was given to each tribe leader?

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