



PARENTING THROUGH THE REBBE'S PRISM

Part II

Mrs. Esther Sternberg

Dear Editor:

I was happy to see Esther Sternberg's article in the Kislev issue of the N'shei Chabad Newsletter addressing the issue of family planning. I think it's an important subject that needs a lot of attention. But if you want to reach the "younger" crowd (women like me), you need to answer the big questions and doubts that always arise when contemplating contraceptives.

My first instinct is to let Hashem family plan for me, but then I look around (quite objectively, I think) and notice that the functional and healthy very large

families (eight children or more) had a lot of help with laundry, cleaning, and childcare. (I remember a time when my mother had a full-time Jewish nanny helping with cooking and babysitting and a full time maid.) They had familial support (mothers that swooped in for two to three weeks when a baby was born) and generally had calmer temperaments. The families I know that did not have these three important components struggled, seriously, and the children are damaged and bitter and will not repeat that lifestyle.

How do you answer that? What do you say to a child who was raised with nine siblings because her mother was inspired by the Rebbe, and felt neglected and poverty-stricken and remembers a batty mother who yelled and cried and now that mother is so worn out from child-rearing, she cannot help her young daughter through the process? These are many of the young mothers of today.

Baruch Hashem I was fortunate to be raised in a home that was calm, plentiful and happy. But my circumstances aren't the same as my mother's and I fear the chaos that many children born close together brings on a family that cannot just get extra help, a bigger house, etc. I've seen what that life produces and I don't want traumatized kids. There are few women who can stay serene and happy with nine kids under 14 with limited help and limited funds.

What's the answer? We all know that each child is a brachah and we believe it! But saying things like "Hashem only gives us what we can handle and our keilim expand" is not an answer. Why didn't those mothers' keilim expand? Why couldn't they take care of their children properly? Why did some of them have breakdowns? I'd love to hear Esther Sternberg's perspective.

Also, why doesn't the magazine interview mothers of large families who were able to raise many children on tight budgets while still preserving those children's dignity and self-esteem?

The Most Nachas Possible

Excerpted from "A Partner in the Dynamic of Creation," a collection of essays based on the teachings of the Rebbe on topics of special interest to women. Reprinted with permission from Sichos in English.

To¹ our forebears, children were the greatest *nachas* possible, and the more children, the more *nachas*. The first *mitzvah* in the Torah is to² "be fruitful and multiply." To bring up children, to initiate them into the faith of their fathers and mothers, to educate them in the Torah and the *mitzvos*—this is the true *nachas* that has always been eagerly treasured by our people.

Today, in many quarters, this approach is being challenged. With well-meaning concern, couples are being urged to plot out the size of their families in advance, so that the time of their children's conception will be anticipated and adequately prepared for.

It must be clearly stated at the outset that according to the *halachah*, Jewish law, the use of contraception is a matter which requires Rabbinic consultation. Some methods are unequivocally prohibited. Other means are permitted, but only in special circumstances, and only after consultation with competent halachic authorities.

Though compliance with the *halachah* overrules human reason, in this case the two are consonant; common experience attests to the wisdom of the Torah approach. Our Torah tradition has nurtured families that have built homes filled

with care, communication, and satisfying inner purpose, raising children who are prepared to accept their roles in society with joy and responsibility.³

THE THIRD PARTNER

What lies at the heart of the Torah approach? The idea that faith in G-d is not restricted merely to the synagogue, but embraces every aspect of our existence. And there is no area in which this is so evident as having children. Man cannot create life; no power on earth can guarantee the birth of a baby. The key to that decision⁴ is in the hands of G-d alone. He is the third Partner in the conception of every child.⁵

Any concerns and reservations that a couple may have, the third Partner understands too; He also knows what potentials they have to cope with those concerns. He is gracious and merciful, and will grant children only when there is the potential for them to lead a life with meaning and purpose.

Besides, when a partnership is offered and rejected, a second offer may not be forthcoming so rapidly. Couples who have spurned the potential blessing of life that G-d offered them in their younger years may not be granted it later on. A couple should accept G-d's blessings when He offers them, gratefully. Let them rest assured that the third Partner,

Let's find out how they did it with little help, small houses, etc. One woman who comes to mind raised 16 children in a small three-bedroom apartment, immaculate, organized, clean. The children are menschlich, happy, and have confidence and dignity. Let's learn from the success stories!

Esther Sternberg responds:

Thank you for your letter. You have very eloquently articulated some of the most common arguments we hear for limiting family size.

First, I'd like to emphasize that the *mitzvos* of the Torah are given to live by – *v'chai bohem*. If anyone has difficulty performing any *mitzvah*, or believes that fulfilling the *mitzvah* poses some danger to her physical or emotional wellbeing, she should discuss the situation with a *mashpia* and a Rav. The Rav's decision will be based on careful consideration of the individual's circumstances. There may be many people who need a *heter* for various reasons. However, each time a *heter* is given it is the exception to the rule—the rule being that the birth of each additional child is both a *mitzvah* and a blessing.

When we speak to a Rav or *mashpia*, we need to focus on our individual situation. What you see in other people's homes and how they deal with their challenges has no bearing on how you will deal with yours.

As to the claim that we need abundant help to raise children properly—you will get no argument from me on that point. It is a correct and proper *taanah* to the Eibershter when we see that He is not providing us, His children, with everything we need to be able to serve Him with ease and comfort. Moshe Rabbeinu himself cried out to Hashem when he saw the Yidden being mistreated – “*Lamah hareiosa l'am hazeh?*” Why have You done wrong to this nation? However, the question is what to do when the material *brachos* are not there, at least not in a form that we can recognize and appreciate. How

being benevolent and all-knowing, can be trusted to know what time is the best time.

MANAGING G-D'S ACCOUNTS

Faith in the third Partner's planning also resolves one of the commonest justifications offered for family planning — the fear of being unable to support more than a certain proposed number of children. Naturally, parents want the best for their children, and this entails accepting a financial burden. But being a good provider is not determined by one's own efforts alone.⁶ True, the Torah requires that a man work to provide for his family. But it is a primary tenet of Judaism that all success and all wealth comes from G-d, that it is His blessings that give sustenance,⁷ not one's own unaided efforts. He will provide for all the children He gives to a couple:⁸ “He Who gives life gives food.”

Couples who undertake financial responsibilities beyond their immediate capacities, and find it quite natural and reasonable to depend on family and friends to help them get married and set up their home, should certainly find it natural and reasonable to depend on Him of Whom it is written,⁹ “The silver is Mine, the gold is Mine.” G-d's accounting system is not our worry; everyone will receive what he needs. It is He Who provides for all of His creatures; one mouth more will not overburden Him.

THE TOLL VS. THE NACHAS

A candid appraisal of one's priorities raises some challenging questions: What does one really want out of life, and what is one doing to get it? Is it possible that

luxuries have been mistaken for necessities? Perhaps the real sources of happiness and well-being, those which don't cost a penny, have been traded in for more expensive but less reliable sources of satisfaction? Defining one's priorities resolves another common and serious concern of potential parents: the personal toll that raising children exacts — a burden in terms of energy, time, and freedom of movement, not to mention the emotional investment required. As with the above-mentioned financial issue, however, the real question

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here is not one of insufficient personal resources, but rather one of priorities. In many other areas of life, such as careers and other personal goals, people choose to put up with prolonged inconvenience and even sacrifice in order to attain their object — if it is considered important enough.

For a person who considers the pursuit of immediate enjoyment a major goal in life, children can no doubt prove to be an obstacle. But a person whose concept of satisfaction centers on meaning and depth will see children as a genuine source of joy, which

mellows and grows with the years as they mature and develop, and ultimately raise families of their own.

The challenge is the scope of one's foresight and planning: Is it long-term or short-term oriented? A person who considers not only the present, but looks ahead to the future, will realize that the pleasure of a few years of freedom from the encumbrance of children soon dissipates, and their shortsightedness has deprived them of the ongoing satisfaction and comfort of children and grandchildren. Is that looking too far ahead? — No more than those who look ahead twenty years or more worrying about their future ability to bring up and educate children.

UNDESIRABLE EFFECTS

Dwarfing all the theoretical arguments and counter-arguments, the statistics of daily experience reveal some sobering facts. Family planning has often

been advocated as a buttress to make the family structure sturdier. Yet precisely in the past few generations, when the concept of family planning has become so widespread, we see the highest incidence of marital discord, domestic tension, misguided parenting, separations, divorces, nervous frustration, and psychiatric disorders.

The human body and psyche were created with infinite intricacy; disrupting their natural functions inevitably invites aberrations. Little wonder, then, that professional marriage counselors are increasingly blaming the tensions set up by birth control for a wide range of marital, mental and emotional breakdowns.¹¹

In earlier generations, especially in Jewish homes, where family planning was never considered, the divorce rate was infinitesimal. The prevalent respect and harmony between Jewish husband and wife were

are we to handle it?

As human beings, we have limited vision. Hashem sees the total picture. He decides which *neshamah* is born to which family. Yes, a mother must do whatever is in her power to be *mechanech* each child in the best way possible. Each of us has our own *avodah* and our own struggles in this area. But did Hashem made a mistake by putting so many *neshamos* in difficult situations? Or are we mistaking “light for darkness and darkness for light; sweet for bitterness and bitterness for sweet” (Yeshaya 5:20)?

It is common today for people to walk around with resentment towards their parents for all sorts of real or imagined offenses. However, part of maturity is to gain a healthy perspective on our own childhood—to gain appreciation for the many sacrifices our parents made to provide us with the best childhood they could. In time, children learn to thank their parents for everything they gave them, especially the gift of life itself!

To state unequivocally that children *are* damaged by growing up in a home that has fewer resources, less support, a mother who is more frazzled, etc., is a gross exaggeration. It also fails to take into account the many wonderful people who were raised in such homes and grew to be very well-adjusted and productive adults.

It is understandable not to want to repeat our parents' mistakes or to subject our children to the traumas of our own childhood. But first we need to be realistic and figure out what the real source of trauma was. Was it the little brother or sister? Or were there other, pre-existing problems that could have been addressed differently, that would have made the little sibling's entry into the world less turbulent?

The child is not the problem and contraception is not the solution. At best, it is a temporary measure to buy time while we get other issues under control. If the problem is the mother's health, *shalom*



legendary in the eyes of the world. And the most critical corollary of this is too obvious to need mentioning — the inevitable effect on the mental and physical health of children who grow up in a peaceful and harmonious household with shared ideals and values.

A LIGHT UNTO THE NATIONS

What has been said above about birth control applies not only to Jews, but to non-Jews as well. All people are created so that the world will be populated and not left barren:¹² “He did not create it a waste land: He formed it to be inhabited.” In a personal sense, too, having children brings settled purpose to one’s life. It has been said that today there is no such thing as

an *apikores*: there is only the *am haaretz*.¹⁵ Opposition — whether in the area of family planning, or, more broadly, in the area of *taharas hamishpachah*, the laws securing family purity — is rooted in ignorance; it is based on the misconception that the way of Torah runs contrary to a natural way of life. When people are educated to appreciate the simple truth, that the Torah leads us to harmony with who we are and what our real purpose is in this world, their opposition will cease.

BEYOND MORTAL GRASP

The effects of birth control are more world-shaking than any mortal can appreciate. For every Jew and every Jewish child is¹⁶ “an entire world.” Indeed,

our Sages teach¹⁷ that even if one single Jew had been absent from Mt. Sinai, the Torah could not have been given. They teach, moreover,¹⁸ that Moshiach will not come until all the possible souls are born into this world.

Considering this, can any person with limited understanding presume to grasp the possible consequences of preventing a particular Jew from being born?

THE MATRIARCHS AS MOTHERS

We are all descendants of the four *imahos* of our people—Sarah, Rivkah, Rochel and Leah. Though each was distinguished for her particular gifts, there was one common bond between them: each longed

for children, with a yearning that knew no limits. The Torah, usually so sparing of its words, describes in detail the lengths to which they went to achieve this end.

They were the archetypes of all Jewish women, and we would do well to heed their lesson. True self-worth does not belong to those who blindly follow the consensus dictated by contemporary society. Children, many children, are the greatest gift and blessing that G-d can bestow upon us; imagined obstacles should not be allowed to stand in the way of enjoying these blessings. And then, with these blessings,¹⁹ “with our youth and our elders..., with our sons and our daughters,” we will go out joyfully to greet our righteous Redeemer, speedily, in our own times. ■

FOOTNOTES

- In a series of addresses in 5740-41 [1980-81], the Rebbe discussed the assumptions underlying the arguments commonly advanced to justify family planning. The above essay is mainly a free summary of addresses delivered on the following occasions: *Shabbos Parshas Naso*, 5740 (see the essay entitled “The Torah Outlook on Family Planning” in *Sichos In English*, Vol. VI, p. 50ff.); the N’shei uBnos Chabad Convention, 17 Sivan, 5740 (see the essay entitled “Family Planning” in *Sichos In English*, Vol. VI, p. 79ff.); and *Shabbos Parshas Shlach*, 5740 (see *Sichos In English*, Vol. VI, p. 94). The Rebbe again spoke on this subject on Rosh Chodesh Shvat, 5741 (see the essay entitled “Family Planning” in *Sichos In English*, Vol. VIII, p. 179ff.).
- Bereishis* 1:28. The fact that procreation is the first *mitzvah* in the Torah indicates its primary importance. According to Scriptural law, a father has fulfilled this command once he has brought at least one son and one daughter into the world. Nevertheless, even after this *mitzvah* is fulfilled, there remains a Rabbinic command to continue having children. (See *Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Ishus* 15:1, 4, 16; *Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer*, sec. 1.)
- For a comprehensive analysis of the social and nationwide obligations involved, such as the total Jewish birthrate, the needs of the Jewish community, and the like, see the article by Rabbi Z. Posner entitled “By Whatever Means...,” in *The Modern Jewish Woman: A Unique Perspective* (Lubavitch Educational Foundation for Jewish Marriage Enrichment, N.Y., 1981).
- Taanis* 2a.
- Kiddushin* 30b.
- We are warned against such a delusion in the verse, “My strength and the power of my hand have made me all this prosperity” (*Devarim* 8:17).
- Cf. “It is the blessing of G-d that bestows wealth” (*Mishlei* 10:22).
- Popular Aram. adage, based on a teaching of R. Shmuel bar Nachmani in *Taanis* 8b.
- Chagai* 2:8.
- I Shmuel*, ch. 1 (and note verses 22-24).
- To revert, parenthetically, to the financial argument: The substantial sums commonly invested in psychiatrists and sundry experts, could well have been put to healthier uses.
- Yeshayahu* 45:18.
- See *Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Melachim* 8:10, on the obligation to teach non-Jews the Seven Universal Laws commanded to Noach and his descendants. By extension, this includes sharing the values and principles needed for the development of a wholesome society.
- Avos* 3:2.
- The former term means “atheist”; the latter term, “ignoramus”. In other words, to qualify as a responsible disbeliever one must first be equipped with a sound knowledge of what one claims to reject.
- Sanhedrin* 37a.
- Mechilta, Shmos* 19:11; *Devarim Rabbah* 7:8.
- Yevamos* 62a.
- Shmos* 10:9.



bayis, etc.—these problems still need to be dealt with. We are not assured a problem-free life simply because we choose to limit the size of our family.

As individuals, maybe there is not much we can do if we are not blessed with the perfect circumstances in which to raise children—a spacious home, abundant help, calm temperament, etc. However, on a community level there is much we can do.

We live in a very individualistic, self-centered society. Someone is having problems? That’s no concern of mine. They shouldn’t have been so “careless” as to get into that situation in the first place. However, from the perspective of the *nefesh Elokis*, we all share the same goal—to do Hashem’s will, raise healthy children and bring more *neshamos* into the world.

The *Hayom Yom* (20 Teves) says, “When two people discuss a matter in

avodah and they learn together, there are two G-dly souls against one natural [animal] soul.”

You see that your friends are struggling? Step up to the plate. Get some friends together to brainstorm and create a huge supportive network for families who are committed to fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *pru u’rvu*. Let’s encourage each other and help each other to fulfill Hashem’s desire for us to bring *neshamos* into this world. Ultimately, they are Hashem’s children, not our own. Let’s show respect for mothers (including our own!) who are having great *mesirus nefesh* to fulfill this *mitzvah*. Maybe if we were less judgmental of each other, mothers would be happier with themselves and their situation and there would be more calm, happy families.

As to interviewing mothers who are

doing an exemplary job under difficult circumstances—great suggestion! [See bio of Mrs. Shula Kazen in this issue—Ed.] We can and should learn from the best. It is also important to remember that we do not all have the same *avodah*. If one woman manages to raise 16 wonderful children in a tiny apartment, while keeping it spotless, never raising her voice and never losing her patience, then *kol hakovod* to her. She is truly worthy of our respect and admiration. But that does not mean that the woman living with more chaos, who sometimes does lose her patience, is not serving Hashem in the best possible manner for *her*. We may not all be able to live up to the highest standard of orderliness and peace in the home. However, that is not a reason to deprive ourselves and our children of the blessing of an additional child. ■