

Parashat Shemot

How Do We Strengthen our *Emunah* in the Hope of Fruitfulness?

Why I insist on Being Called Chana Bracha

It has been more than 20 years since I added my second name בְּרַכָּה/Bracha, which means blessing. Most people call me my full name now, but that's only because I won't let them get away with anything less. I don't want to let go of this blessing. This week's *parasha* is called שְׁמוֹת/*Shemot* – Names. Our name is the vessel that holds the essence of our soul. It determines our destiny. When Hashem wanted to bless Avraham and Sarah with children, He changed their name. He added the Hebrew letter ה/*heh* to both of their names. Therefore, after suffering from secondary infertility for more than ten years, I went to Dayan Fisher ז"ל, known for his wisdom regarding names, to ask him advice about adding a name that would change my *mazal* (destiny) to have children. I was not surprised when the Rabbi told me to add a name with the letter ה/*heh*. The letter ה/*heh* is a female letter. This letter distinguishes the Hebrew word for woman אִשָּׁה/*isha*, from אִישׁ/*ish* – man. According to Kabbalah, the letter ה/*heh* has the power of birth... (*Kli Yakar, Bereishit 17:15*). Adding the name בְּרַכָּה/Bracha to my name truly brought me countless blessings. I indeed gave birth to another child, to a seminary for women and to the books that I continue to write. "If a couple lived outside Israel for a certain amount of years and then came to Israel, they give them ten years from when they came to the land, perhaps in the *zechut* (merit) of the Land they would conceive" (Ramban, *Bereishit 16:3*). After our oldest son was born in 1982, we lived for six years in Israel before having to leave for the US, where we lived from 1988-1992. Four years after returning to the Land, we had our youngest son in 1996. Together the years we lived in Israel before the birth of our second son was exactly ten years. *Parashat Shemot* is the *parasha* of fertility. It relates how the Jewish women in Egypt gave birth to six babies at one time (Rashi, *Shemot 1:7*). I never thought about it until now, but it is not by chance that this is the *parasha* during which we conceived our second son; and this year marks the 20-year anniversary of that miraculous conception. Therefore, I thought to share an excerpt from the diary that I kept during the time I underwent fertility treatments. One of my alumna students just had a baby at the age of 51 or 52, and another is pregnant at the age of 56! I hope that my words will inspire more women to never to give up having children.

Fertility Treatments Highlights the Divine Miracle of a Baby

Yom Shishi, the 20th of Tevet, Friday, Jan 12 1996

I haven't had the momentum to write for a while and I am afraid that so many feelings and observations have meanwhile gotten lost. Yesterday, I went back to the fertility clinic for the fertilization. In the bed next to me, lay a woman who was also going through treatment- for the second time. The first time around none of her four ovum were fertilized. What a disappointment. This reinforced my understanding of G-d's miraculous intervention in my case. You might think that our ability to interact with the creation process through the IVF procedure would diminish the Divine miracle of creation. Now that we have so much power and ability to interfere with the natural reproductive system, it might seem as if we have emerged to the level of divinity. On the

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

contrary, our progress in fertility procedures heightens our awareness of the Divine blessings necessary to procure a child. In spite of the advanced technology, no expert can define the reason why only sometimes an embryo is produced, only some embryos become implanted, only some of them grow, while others are expelled. Through the fertility process, we closely follow each of the stages in producing a child, thereby heightening our awareness of the Divine blessing necessary for success. What usually takes place 'naturally' concealed within the womb is now brought out into our consciousness. It is the lack of awareness of what it takes to produce a healthy baby, which makes us much more prone to take the miraculous process for granted. Through our interaction with nature, the complex miracle of creating an infant becomes clear, making us tremble in hope and pray for the success of each stage. I prayed all Wednesday and was unable to concentrate on preparing classes. I understood that nothing is to be taken for granted. When I was told that the first step of fertilization had succeeded I was overjoyed.

Walking the Tightrope between No Expectations and Hope

My husband hadn't even called to hear the news. It seems that men are just less emotionally involved in the whole thing. I guess it is natural, since it does not take place in their body. Therefore, they are more detached. While waiting on line for treatment in the fertility clinic, there was a lively discussion among the patients. One middle-aged woman who had been through six cycles of IVF without conceiving said that she had adapted the attitude of indifference, in order to avoid later disappointment. The man sitting across from her half asked half interjected, "But don't you have to have a positive attitude in order to be successful?" I was thinking to myself about the fine line between expecting the worst, yet hoping for the best. It is almost impossible to expect the worst while hoping for the best. While you think positive baby thoughts, envisioning hugging the little cuddly one, you cannot simultaneously imagine the bursts of blood darkening your sweet dreams.

The Sprout of Motherly Hope

All those years when my light of hope was overshadowed by acceptance, acceptance that I might never again conceive, there was no sparkle in my prayers. When people told me how G-d performs miracles I could only shake my head dejectedly and say, "I know, I know, but you need a *zechut*, you need to be on a high level to deserve G-d's miracles." I was at peace with myself; I did not expect any change to my routine. I enjoyed my independence and strove to gain satisfaction in other areas than childbearing. I did not have to be disappointed but I was unable to accept my situation while at the same time praying from the depth of my heart. Now the situation has turned. I can no longer be indifferent like the woman in the waiting room. I have changed with the sprout of hope. It is the way of a mother to be permeated with hope. My prayer has received a new dimension.

Acting Upon Their Hope

This week's *parasha* tells us about the Jewish midwives. Had they not been enveloped by hope, they would have been unable to withstand Pharaoh's command to kill the male babes. They could have easily said, "Why bring more children into this horrible world?" This was the attitude of the men who divorced their wives. It took a Miriam to convince her father to remarry her mother, by

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

saying, "You are worse than Pharaoh! Pharaoh decreed only against the males but you also decree against the females" (Rashi, *Shemot* 2:1). There is no cruelty worse than losing hope. The *Eishet Chail* (Woman of Valor) envisions an empty field and plants a vineyard (*Mishlei* 31:16). A midwife is called a wise woman for "who is wise? The one who sees that which is born" (*Babylonian Talmud, Tamid* 32a). In order to conceive we must believe. In order to be redeemed, we must anticipate redemption. Rambam says that whoever does not expect and await the coming of Mashiach denies the entire Torah (*Hilchot Melachim* 11:1). The Jewish women in Egypt had a vision. They were not afraid to bring children into the world. Because they acted upon their hope, they increased and multiplied very exceedingly. In the merit of the righteous women were our fathers delivered from Egypt (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah* 11b).

Taking the Risk of Hope

I believe that their greatest merit was their hope. This is reflected in the names of the midwives. Shifra – "She beautifies the babe." (Rashi, *Shemot* 1:15). In a situation of despair, no one would care about beauty. Mere survival is all that counts. To beautify the babe is a luxury in the spirit of hope. Hope of better days in which beauty will no longer go unheeded. Likewise, the name Puah is closely linked with hope of redemption. Puah means speech, it is the nickname of Miriam who prophesied and said, "In the future my mother will give birth to the redeemer" (Rashi, *ibid.*). The women in Egypt went in the footsteps of their midwives. They used their copper mirrors to beautify themselves and flirt with their husbands. Each gazed at herself in her mirror together with her husband, saying endearingly to him, "See, I am handsomer than you!" Thus they awakened their husbands' affection and subsequently became the mothers of many children. Even these, they did not hesitate to bring as a contribution towards the Tabernacle. Moshe was about to reject these mirrors that the women brought as a contribution towards the Tabernacle, since they were made to pander to their vanity. Yet, Hashem said to him, "Accept them; these are dearer to Me than all the other contributions, because through them the women reared those huge hosts in Egypt!" (*Midrash Tanchuma Pekudei* 9). These mirrors became uplifted and most holy. They were used to make the washbasin for sanctifying the hands of the Kohen before his holy service. It was through the hope of the Jewish midwives in Egypt that the nation of Israel was born. Besides giving physical birth to the next generation, they became the spiritual midwives of Israel. How can I be indifferent with role models like this? I have to take the risk of hope. I am well aware of the risk of disappointment, which I have to dismiss.

The Power of Super-Conscious Mind

Even on the physiological level, positive thinking is recommended. "The brain rules the body in many subconscious ways, including its control of the body's major hormones..." (Nicholas Wade, *Method & Madness; The Spin Doctors, The N.Y. Times Magazine* <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/07/magazine/method-madness-the-spin-doctors.html>). Imagining nursing my own baby might influence my body to produce the hormones necessary to implant the embryo. I recently read a book called, *The Power of the Unconscious Mind*, by George Murphy. His basic message was that your thoughts create reality. If you strongly believe that something will happen, then it will. I, therefore, have no choice other than believing. Before I go to sleep at night, I imagine life within me growing. When praying to G-d I imagine the joy of motherhood for which I long.

Sacrifice and Prayers for Renewed Motherhood

I let my face caress the smooth rocks of the *Kotel* (The Western Wall). "Dear G-d you are my father. I know you love me and want only what is best for me. I yearn to be like You, full of compassion for Your children. You are our father. Like You, I want to be a mother. I want to give and nurture to let live and grow, to teach and show." We learn from Chana that in order for our prayers to be answered we need to make a promise (I *Shemuel* 1:11). "Dear G-d, I promise that everything in my life will yield to the need of this unborn babe. You know that this is not a minor sacrifice. I am willing to let go of my ambition for teaching and writing and becoming 'someone important' for the sake of performing my role as a mother."

A Sign from G-d, to Stir Yearning into Prayer

Perhaps only years of childlessness could instill within me the importance of motherhood. As I stepped back, puffy eyed, to take leave of the *Kotel*, a pair of clear blue eyes met mine. They were the sweetest eyes of a baby intently looking at me. I returned his gaze and felt a surge of yearning. Yearning to hold my own sweet baby in my bosom, I closed my eyes as the tears streamed down. "Oh G-d, please answer my prayers. Please grant me fruits of the womb. I can no longer bear being a barren tree who yields no fruit, year after year after year. Until when? I only want to fulfill my purpose as a woman. If it is your will that I be blessed after having voiced my prayer, please G-d help me to pray in the right way." As I slowly made my way away from the wall of tears, a feeling of serenity caressed and soothed my heart. How often do you see a baby this cute among the praying women at the Wall in the peak of winter? Is this not a sign from G-d, to help stir my yearning into prayer? Would He give me a sign to intensify my prayers for no reason? Of course, there is always a reason for prayer whether it is fulfilled or not. Yet, I feel deep inside that G-d would not tease me like that, had I been a hopeless case. I believe that I will give birth anew when the time is right. May our continued hope sprout forth and may we all be blessed with everlasting fruitfulness!