



## Are Women Obligated to Fulfill the Mitzvah “Be Fruitful and Multiply”?

### The Blessing of Raising Large Families

A new world has just been created, and the first human beings within it. Together with their initial blessing they received the mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply! The main principle of life including human life is to proliferate. The world was not created to be desolate (Rashi, *Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot* 62a). As a consolation to the childless and spouseless, being fruitful and multiplying can also be understood as being productive and creative in the world. Yet, the straightforward understanding of fulfilling the mitzvah is to raise large families. While the minimum fulfillment from the Torah is to bear both a son and a daughter, the Talmudic sages extended the obligation to continued fruitfulness (*Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot* 62 b). Rabbi Natan says in the name of Beit Shammai: The mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply is fulfilled with two sons and two daughters... (*Yevamot* 62a). In the Yeshiva where I returned to Torah, we were encouraged to have as many children as we could possibly have. Many of my friends had more than ten children. While raising large families comes with much sacrifice and toil especially by the women, most of my friends with numerous children feel very accomplished and blessed, as described in the following verse, “Your wife will be as a fruitful vine in the innermost parts of your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table” (*Tehillim* 128:3). Often, people would ask my friends how they could afford raising so many children, to which they would answer, “A child is born with bread in his mouth.” Thus, financial concerns should not dictate family planning as Hashem provides for each additional child. This is in contrast to the outlook I was raised with in my upper middleclass Western world. While each of us three sisters had our own room, I doubt that we had a happier childhood than those who were five children to a bedroom in bunkbeds.

### Women are Exempt from the Mitzvah of Begetting Children

Hashem addresses both the first man and women when He initially directs them to be fruitful and multiply:

**וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶתְּכֶם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹשׁוּהָ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל חַיַּי הָרֶמֶשׂוֹת עַל הָאָרֶץ:**

“G-d blessed them, and G-d said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the sky and over all the beasts that tread upon the earth’” (*Bereishit* 1:28).

While the plural language indicates that Hashem spoke to both Adam and Chava, women are exempt from the Biblical commandment to procreate (*Shulchan Aruch, Even Ha’ezer* 1:13).

My initial understanding of the reason for this, is that just as Hashem doesn’t have to command us to breathe, it is unnecessary to command women to have babies. Every healthy woman has a natural motherly instinct encouraging her to want children of her own. Additionally, it seems to me that since pregnancy and childbearing come with pain and hardship, it is unfair to command a woman to endure such discomfort, except if she voluntarily takes it upon herself on her own accord. I found a source for this reasoning in the commentary of Rabbi Meir Simcha. He explains that whereas the mitzvah given to Adam and Chava was incumbent upon both of them, the mitzvah given to Noach was only to him and his sons

(*Bereishit* 9:7). When Hashem reiterated the command to be fruitful to Ya'acov, the mitzvah was written in the singular and definitely addressed only to him as the patriarch of the Jewish people, (*Bereishit* 35:11). The reason for this change is that Hashem doesn't command mitzvot that are painful, dangerous and even life threatening. Before the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, childbirth was a natural, simply normal life-event and therefore man and woman were both commanded. As a consequence of the sin, pregnancy and childbirth became painful. Therefore, woman could no longer be commanded to bear children (Meschech Chochma, *Bereishit* 9:7).

### Giving Birth for Mashiach

Whether women are commanded or not to bring forth children into the world, it is evident that women's participation in the mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply is essential and this mitzvah cannot be fulfilled otherwise. The word 'mitzvah' refers not only to a commandment but also to actions done in according with the Divine will. On that level it is obvious that even if women aren't obligated to have children, women certainly fulfill the mitzvah of being fruitful by having children. Moreover, we are also obligated, whenever possible, to assist others to be able to do a mitzvah. Among the twenty-four things that prevent proper teshuvah is stopping one's friend from doing a mitzvah ... for it is a mitzvah to assist our friend in his performance of a mitzvah (Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuvah* Chapter 5). Maharam Schick explains that not only may one not prevent someone else from performing a mitzvah, but there is also a mitzvah, based on the principle of *areivut* (the mutual responsibility of Jews), to actively help someone else perform a mitzvah which is incumbent upon him. Due to *areivut* we are commanded to see to it that a fellow Jew will do the mitzvot of the Torah, and if [any fellow Jew] will lack [the opportunity to perform a mitzvah] it is as if I am lacking it (*Sha'ar HaTziyun* 655:5). Going through the effort of raising a large family demonstrates great care and mutual responsibility as well as emunah (faith) that Hashem indeed will provide. Moreover, it is one of the most essential ways of bringing Mashiach and hastening redemption as it states: The Mashiach, son of David, will not come until all the souls of the body have been finished, i.e., until all souls that are destined to inhabit physical bodies will do so. As it is stated: "For the spirit that enwraps itself is from Me, and the souls that I have made" (*Yesha'yahu* 57:16). It is taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Eliezer says: Anyone who does not engage in the mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply is considered as though he sheds blood, as it is stated: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (*Bereishit* 9:6), and it is written immediately afterwards: "And you, be fruitful and multiply" (*Bereishit* 9:7); (*Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot* 63b). As a woman who struggled with infertility, I can only admire the faithful women who put their entire being into raising large families and thereby bring down so many souls into their physical body. Today, when *geulah* events are celebrated the world over by women, let's not forget the most guaranteed way that women can bring about redemption!