

**THE FOLLOWING TEXTS** explore rabbinic interpretations and responses to the biblical injunction to “be fruitful and multiply.” The first text comes from the Babylonian Talmud, a compendium of Jewish legal text, theology, and philosophy, edited between approximately 500-700 CE in modern-day Iraq. This Talmudic text unpacks the value of procreation by weaving together biblical verses that lend authority and intertextual meaning to the original biblical commandment in Genesis 9:7. This text culminates in the discussion of procreation by Ben Azzai, a sage in the third century who notoriously abstained from marriage.

The Talmudic teachings are followed here by a passage from Sifrei Devarim, an early rabbinic work of midrash connected to the biblical book of Deuteronomy, compiled and edited in 200 CE, which offers an expanded definition of the word “sons” to include students and disciples. Last is an excerpt from a modern guide to Jewish practice, Peninei Halakha, written by Eliezer Melamed, which offers a creative interpretation of Ben Azzai’s abstention from marriage as it is described in the Talmud, juxtaposing the life-giving nature of Torah study with the project of procreation.

Talmud Bavli Yevamot 63b-64a

תניא רבי אליעזר אומר כל מי שאין עוסק  
בפריה ורביה כאילו שופך דמים שנאמר  
(בראשית ט, ו) שופך דם האדם באדם דמו  
ישפך וכתוב בתריה ואתם פרו ורבו

It is taught in a baraita<sup>11</sup> 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” (Genesis 9:6), and it is written immediately afterward: “And you, be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 9:7).

אמרו לו לבן עזאי יש נאה דורש ונאה מקיים  
נאה מקיים ואין נאה דורש ואתה נאה דורש  
ואין נאה מקיים

Rabbi Ya’akov says: It is as though he diminishes the Divine Image, as it is stated: “For in the image of God He made man” (Genesis 9:6), and it is written immediately afterward: “And you, be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 9:7).

רבי יעקב אומר כאילו ממעט הדמות שנאמר  
(בראשית ט, ו) כי בצלם אלהים עשה את האדם  
וכתיב בתריה ואתם פרו וגו'

Ben Azzai says: It is as though he sheds blood and also diminishes the Divine Image, as it is stated: “And you, be fruitful and multiply,” after the verse that alludes to both shedding blood and the Divine Image.

בן עזאי אומר כאילו שופך דמים וממעט הדמות  
שנאמר ואתם פרו ורבו

They said to Ben Azzai: There is a type of scholar who expounds well and fulfills his own teachings well, and another who fulfills well and does not expound well. But you, who have never married, expound well on the importance of procreation, and yet you do not fulfill well your own teachings.

אמר להן בן עזאי ומה אעשה שנפשי חשקה  
בתורה אפשר לעולם שיתקיים על ידי אחרים

Ben Azzai said to them: What shall I do, as my soul yearns for Torah, and I do not wish to deal with anything else. It is possible for the world to be maintained by others, who are engaged in the mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply.

#### Additional Sources:

Sifrei Devarim 34

לבניך - אלו תלמידיך. וכן אתה מוצא בכל  
מקום שהתלמידים קרויים בנים שנאמר (דברים  
יד א) בנים אתם לה' אלהיכם, ואומר (מלכים  
ב:ב) ויצאו בני הנביאים, וכי בני הנביאים היו?  
והלא תלמידים היו! אלא מכאן לתלמידים שהם  
קרויים בנים.

... to your sons: These are your disciples. And thus do you find in all places, that disciples are called “sons,” as it says, “You are the sons of God,” (Deuteronomy 14:1). And it says “And the sons of the prophets came forth” (II Kings 2:3). Now were they the sons of the prophets? Were they not disciples? This shows that disciples were called “sons.”

1 An early tradition in Jewish oral law not collected in the Mishnah

Peninei Halakha,  
Simchat HaBayit U'Virchato 5:2

הרי שרק מצווה אחת ישנה שהעוסק בה יכול בשעת הדחק להתבטל ממצוות פרו ורבו, והיא מצוות תלמוד תורה. וזאת משום שלימוד התורה עצמו מוסיף חיים לעולם. עובדה שבן עזאי, למרות שלא עסק בפריה ורביה, התעמק בחשיבותה הגדולה של המצווה ודרש על ערכה, ובוודאי מכוח תלמודו נולדו ילדים רבים.

אבל חזקיהו המלך שרצה להתנות את המצווה בכך שילדיו לא יהיו רשעים, ביטל את העיקרון המקודש שלה, שמבטא את הערך המוחלט של החיים. ועל כן היה צפוי לעונש נורא בעולם הזה ובעולם הבא.

למדנו מכך, שיסוד החיים הוא הערך הראשון במעלה, שכן גם רשעים יכולים לחזור בתשובה. יתר על כן, גם אם לא יחזרו בתשובה, הצדיקים לומדים ממעשיהם לקחים. אבל כאשר מבטלים את המצווה, עוקרים את הכל וכופרים בערך החיים שברא ה' בעולם הזה.

We see that there is only one mitzvah one can engage in and thereby, under pressing circumstances, abstain from the mitzvah of procreation: the mitzvah of Torah study. This is because Torah study itself adds life to the world. The fact is that although Ben Azzai did not engage in procreation, he delved deeply into the great importance of the mitzvah and expounded upon its great value. Certainly, many children were born as a result of his teachings.

In contrast, when Hizkiyahu<sup>2</sup> wished to stipulate his performance of the mitzvah on having children who would not be wicked, he was negating the sacred principle underlying the mitzvah, which expresses the absolute value of life. This is why he would have been subject to terrible punishment in both this world and the next.

We learn from this that life is the supreme value, and even the wicked can repent. Furthermore, even if they do not repent, the righteous can learn from their mistakes. However, when one disregards the mitzvah altogether, he uproots everything and denies the value of God-given life in this world.

### Sample Discussion Questions:

1. Each of the sages in the Talmud use biblical texts to support the importance of procreation. How are each of these biblical prooftexts distinct? What do you make of each of them?
2. How does Ben Azzai defend his own lack of family-building?
3. What does the interpretation of “sons” in Sifrei Devarim to include students and disciples reveal about the rabbinic perception of family and learning?
4. In Peninei Halakha, Melamed argues that Torah adds life to the world. How do—or doesn't—Torah and other creative pursuits add life to the world?
5. In what ways do you participate in “fruitful” and “multiplying” behaviors? What kinds of activities or projects have you used birthing metaphors for? Where do you find resonances between the way you use these terms and the ideas present in these texts?

### Further Reading:

For more on expansive approaches to kinship among the rabbinic sages see Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (University of California Press, 1993), especially Chapter 5, “Lusting After Learning: The Torah as ‘The Other Woman.’”

For a critical contemporary analysis of this mitzvah see Ronit Ir-Shay, “Family Planning: A Halakhic-Gender Perspective” in *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* (No. 12, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Here Melamed is referencing Hezekiah, the king of Judah in the 8th century BCE. According to tradition, the king ordered the Jewish people to study Torah in order to prevent the fulfillment of a prophecy that his future children would be wicked. (See Isaiah 38, and Berakhot 10a for rabbinic interpretation.)