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### Bioethics and Reproductive Rights in Judaism

Israel can be thought of as a country that is widely accepting and encouraging of IVF and other artificial insemination treatments. These treatments, which in other countries carry the stink of judgment and inaccessibility, are administered and controlled through highly accessible government services. They have become a popular choice for women who, for a multitude of reasons, have not or cannot get pregnant the natural way. Although Susan Martha Khan in her book “Reproducing Jews: A Cultural Account of Assisted Conception in Israel” touches upon many issues relating to motherhood, Judaism, and bioethics, I would like to focus on one particular thing: the relationship between artificial insemination and the Jewish commandment to reproduce and multiply.

Many conservative and orthodox Rabbis in Israel feel that artificial insemination perverts the holy idea of the natural family and misinterprets the commandment to procreate (57). ““She is not obliged to procreate,” Rabbi Davis Golinkin says of women, “remember, the obligation to procreate falls only on the man”” (57). Negating the obligation to procreate does not eliminate the cultural or biological desire for motherhood as experienced by a woman, but it refutes the religious aspect of the argument by placing the obligation to procreate on man. It also leads to the implication that a woman who undergoes artificial insemination is somehow less Jewish than others because she is going out of her way to fulfill an obligation that is, in Golinkin’s opinion, not hers. Orthodox and conservative Rabbis are also concerned with the ways in which artificial insemination leads to potential incest (33). They feel that conceiving a child who does not know of their father raises the risk that they one day have relations with someone related to them.

Unsparingly, religiously observant Jews in Israel still tend to favor the traditional ideas of the nuclear family and conception (59). Although the “culture of high visibility” in Israel makes it so artificial insemination is more readily available, no official records on how many women are artificially inseminated exist in the Israeli government for fear that it would open a “Pandora’s box” of issues for the orthodox community (59).

Complicating these seemingly clearcut conservative ideals is the lack of Halakhic prohibitions against artificial insemination (59). Although many Jewish Rabbis take issue with these new reproductive technologies, nothing in the Jewish bible or related scripts prohibits this kind of conception. A lot of women feel that they are furthering the Jewish community by honoring the command in the Torah to “be fruitful and multiply” (9). This combined with the Holocaust, which instilled in Jews the intense fear that they can be systematically annihilated at any moment, creates a culture that is undoubtedly geared towards motherhood and childbirth (23). Talya, a forty-year-old woman in Tel Aviv, says that part of her desire to have a child is that her parents were Holocaust survivors who lost their whole family in the war (61). “They raised me with the message that you can disappear tomorrow,” says Tayla (61). Therefore, although she had her son Benny through artificial insemination, her parents were overjoyed by the “continuation” of their family and found little relevance in the manner of conception (61). Nurit, a thirty-eight-year-old lawyer, shared a similar desire to maintain a Jewish family despite the tragic death of her husband at the Jordanian border (61). The couple had already taken steps to artificially inseminate Nuri with her husband's embryos at the time of his death and Nuri decided to proceed with this process, saying that “through the embryos, her husband lived on” (62). Both of these women felt that they were doing the right thing by extending the creation and longevity of the Jewish population, and neither of them was “motivated by a desire to undermine

traditional family ideologies” (44). In fact, Kahn makes a point to illustrate how women who have undergone artificial insemination actually depend on “traditional families and informal childcare networks for emotional and practical support” (44). Many of them lean on their mothers, fathers, and siblings to provide help at all stages of the process. The child is raised as a “product of family relationships” and, because women in Israel usually choose Jewish sperm donors, the child is still looked at as ““one of us”” (45). In other words, by maintaining religious continuation throughout the artificial insemination process, women feel as though they are not challenging traditional values or offending the Jewish state (44). Instead, they are continuing the lineage of the Jewish people in a slightly different but no less productive manner.

Although it is tempting to draw clear-cut lines between religious affiliation and opinions on artificial insemination, the reality is that the situation is much more complicated. Martha Kahn tells the stories of several women who, for one reason or another, struggled with this process. “I cried all the way home,” says Tali, a thirty-nine-year-old from Tel Aviv, “It was very sad, very lonely. It’s not the best option, but it’s the option I have right now” (19). For Etti, a forty-year-old who works at Beer Sheva, it was a period in time to “mourn a lot of things. You are not going to have a fairy-tale life... There’s a real mourning about being alone” (19). It is not a stretch of the imagination to say that artificial insemination, with or without religious backing, is an emotional and complicated process that shows a significant change in one’s lifestyle, goals, and preferences. Even the physical process of getting inseminated reflects a variety of preferences and difficult decisions. One needs to pick a clinic and a doctor, go through a psychological evaluation and, if necessary, endure hormonal treatments to stimulate the ovaries (20). Although Israel has one of the most accessible and least stigmatized processes in the world, interviews throughout the book reveal that artificial insemination does not usually start off as a

woman's first choice. Instead, it is the beginning of the complex process of raising a child in an alternative manner.

The relationship between artificial insemination and the Jewish obligation to reproduce reflects both a religious divide within the Jewish community and a broader cultural divide that reflects social and personal values. In fact, although this is a book relating to artificial insemination in a Jewish state, the reality is that this type of elective procedure cannot just be understood in one context, but instead is a combination of different sectors of life. Many of the women in this book choose to pursue artificial insemination not because religion had failed them but because some other part of their life, whether it be family history, lack of romantic success, or sexual preference, had to lead them there. Going forward, in order to understand and compile the most accurate ethnographies and information on artificial insemination, it should be examined not just from the religious standpoint, but from the social, cultural, and political ones as well.