

Causes for the Role of Reproductive Technology in Judaism

Assisted reproductive practices include a wide variety of different medical technologies. Even within relatively confined areas, these technologies can be seen in a number of different ways, with some viewing all assistive reproductive practices positively, some viewing them all negatively, and some having mixed feelings. This division can be seen in geographic regions, cultural groups, religious groups, and more. Importantly, for all, there can be a startling assortment of emotions, which can at times be contradictory, as one attempts to settle their often contradictory beliefs on parenthood. In her book *Reproducing Jews*, Susan Kahn illustrates this swirling pool of emotion and belief in Israel, exploring through a vast array of cultural accounts of those living in Israel the views and practices surrounding assistive reproductive technology. This is echoed in *Ethnography, Exegesis, and Jewish Ethical Reflection*, wherein Don Seeman explores further Jewish and Israeli practices surrounding reproductive technology, including using comparisons to the actions and belief systems of those in other groups. Through these two readings, a clear comprehension of the basis for the role of reproductive technology in Judaism is established, and a number of different perspectives on that role are elucidated.

Kahn frames the reproductive practices of the Israeli state and Jews in general within a broader context of the goals of the communities involved. Driving this support of reproductive technology, Kahn argues, is an “overwhelming desire to create Jewish babies.” It is as a result of this underlying philosophy that, both at a state level and at an

individual level, reproductive technologies are so largely supported in Jewish culture and in Israel. She supports this argument by using data on the presence of reproductive technologies in Israel, noting that at the time of her research, there was a higher per capita rate of fertility clinics there than anywhere else in the world. She further notes that reproductive technologies are covered by health insurance in Israel, up to certain limits, and that the regulations that were previously in place quickly faced substantive legal challenges. Also importantly, Kahn contrasts this information with the state's treatment of technology that might limit growing families, with state support to family planning and abortion limited or nonexistent. This illustrates clearly where the priorities of the Jewish state lie on the issue of reproductive technology. While strongly favourable in dealing with technologies that promote family and population growth, their support for reproductive technology quickly wanes when the technology is unrelated to expanding the family or works to shrink family size, supporting Kahn's argument that the Jewish support for reproductive technologies is at least in part driven by a desire to increase the Jewish population.

Seeman expands on the analysis provided by Kahn on the modern drivers of support for reproductive technology, including in his paper levels on analysis dating back to the Biblical period. He raises a plethora of examples of various reproductive tactics used by those depicted in the Hebrew Bible, emphasising particularly stories told in the Book of Genesis, including such examples of the attempts by Abraham and Sarah to have a child using Hagar as a traditional surrogate. However, Seeman notes, stories told in Genesis don't necessarily stand as the basis for the understanding of reproductive technologies and strategies used by all Jews. In one example provided, an

American Orthodox Rabbi noted that the Book of Leviticus is used as the foundation for Jewish family law and practices, in contrast to the common Christian usage of Genesis, illustrating why a dichotomy exists between Christian and Jewish practices surrounding reproduction. Seeman goes farther, noting that while Catholics and Christians tend to interpret open-ended segments of scripture using their judgement, Jewish law tends to focus on explicit prohibitions or allowances written. This analysis suggests a deeper reason for the modern favorability of Israel and many Jews towards reproductive technology. Rather than Kahn's analysis, which posits a mostly practical support for the technology (where it is a means to an end), Seeman's conclusions suggest more theological reasons, at least in comparison to Christianity, where the allowances are grounded more in a different interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

Of most interest to me in reading Kahn's ethnography was the dichotomy that exists between Israel and many other parts of the Middle East (specifically Lebanon), seen in Inhorn's ethnography *He Won't be my Son*. Both analyses used similar methods, engaging in ethnographic research, and travelled to geographically similar places in the Middle East. However, these similarities proved to be largely overwhelmed by the wide gulf of cultural and religious differences that existed. While Inhorn did focus on many individuals who were at least considering the use of reproductive technologies, her analysis of the religious views of both Sunni and Shia Islam showed that those interviewed were more exceptions to the rule than they were the rule. Though I previously understood the substantial cultural differences that exist in the Middle East, the differences between these two readings were vast, and stuck out to me as being particularly interesting, as they speak to situations beyond just that of reproductive

technology. Also interesting to me is the interactions between the reasoning found in Seeman's piece and the reasoning found in Kahn's piece for why Jewish law and practice is so much more supportive of reproductive technology. The theological basis provided in Seeman's chapter would've been more in line with what I expected the reason for this support to be going into these readings: Jews support reproductive technology more than Christians because they interpret the Bible differently and have religious laws. However, reading Kahn's argument, it does make a substantial amount of sense that more practical considerations would also be taken into account. I would definitely be curious to read more about the interactions between these two factors, especially about whether as a desire to reproduce grew in the Jewish population, interpretations of Jewish law and the Bible changed to be more lenient towards reproductive technologies.

Just as opinions on the benefits and drawbacks of reproductive technologies vary, so can the reasons behind one's choice to support or oppose the use of such technology. Susan Kahn in *Reproducing Jews* raises the argument that, at least in part, a desire to expand the Jewish population explains the support of assistive reproductive technology in Israel and among Jews, as well as opposition to reproductive technology which might limit family size. Don Seeman in *Ethnography, Exegesis, and Jewish Ethical Reflection* focuses on a more theological argument for why the Jewish population tends to be more supportive of reproductive technology relative to other Abrahamic religions, noting differences in interpretation of the Bible and therefore in Jewish law. While not competing directly with each other, these two views provide different perspectives on the driving force for wider Jewish support for reproductive technologies. Acting in concert, they can provide a fuller explanation for exactly what

drives this support, showing both theological and practical considerations which both act as supporting factors. Through both of these works, it is clear that reasons behind Jewish support for reproductive technologies are not uniform, and that a wide variety of justifications can be used for members of the Jewish population in supporting this technology.