

### **Law, Politics, and Kinship: “Be Fruitful and Multiply”**

The role that sex plays in the lives of global citizens is diverse and complex, for social precepts and religious affiliations structure the attitudes of each individual. However, although it serves as the biological means for human survival and a conduit for human connection, its nature is often characterized as promiscuous when performed under the “wrong” conditions. Regardless of the systematic taboo cast over the act itself by religious frameworks, reproduction, almost contradictorily, is the word of God. When describing the story of Adam and Eve, Genesis 1:28 states, “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘*Be fruitful and multiply* and fill the earth’”, indicating the explicit duty of the first humans to fulfill their potential by populating the world through their own means. For the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, this commandment has worked to shape the foundational beliefs with which people ground their ideologies of sex. As Susan Khan, author of “Reproducing Jews: A Cultural Account of Assisted Conception in Israel”, points out, “Reproduction is understood as an imperative religious duty that is foundational to their entire way of life” (Khan, 2000, p. 3).

In Judaism particularly, an intention to “be fruitful and multiply” under the convent of marriage is seen as one of the most fundamental principles to their continuity as a culture; after centuries of historical ostracism and mass genocide, the opportunity to produce more Jewish people is considered a *mitzvah*, or an act of goodness. It is likely for this reason that Judaism presents one of the most flexible ideological structures when it comes to newly evolving pathways to parenthood for struggling couples – the chance to produce a new member of the community often overbears much of the opposition surrounding the technicalities. While the opinions of rabbinical authorities vary depending on background and traditional upbringing, Khan argues, “It rapidly became apparent that though poskim are supposed to be interpreting

God's law regarding the appropriate combinations of reproductive material, God's law seems to depend a lot on whom you ask and who is asking" (Khan, 2000, p. 92). The apparent unconventionality of modern Jewish thought is that it is diverse – contrasting beliefs are in constant conversation with one another, ongoing elaborations relate back to written and oral traditions, and religious leaders maintain relevance by becoming the link between the Torah and contemporary issues. With this understanding, it is clear that the kosherness of reproductive technologies is fluid and open to interpretation.

However, regarding the limits of this flexibility, Susan Khan does make one point clear, "If it is *d-oraita* (derived from the Torah itself) then there is nothing you can do, but if it is *d'rabbon* (derived from rabbinic interpretation) then you have more room to work with, you can be more flexible" (Khan, 2000, 108). Though there is clearly no specific mention of artificial insemination in the Torah itself, the Talmud (a collection of ancestral Jewish written teachings and stories) presents an interesting set of ideas from which rabbinic scholars have pulled their own interpretations. The story of Ben Zoma and Ben Sira are two examples the text describes that serve to legitimize the mechanics of this form of conception – the first concluding that the act of conception is not adulterous if sexual relations do not occur and the latter providing an assumed kinship link between a sperm donor and their biological child.

While many orthodox Jewish people rely on such interpreted precedent to make decisions regarding reproductive technology use, the disparity in leniency across other Abrahamic religions is noteworthy. As written in "He Won't Be My Son: Middle Eastern Muslim Men's Discourses of Adoption and Gamete Donation", the author Marcia C. Inhorn describes a common sentiment shared among many Muslim men in Lebanon that a child either adopted or conceived via gamete donation "would not be their son" (Inhorn, 2006, 94). While sects of Islam

differ in their willingness to approach infertility with an open mind to these possibilities, it is fascinating to contemplate the sources of divergence from other modern Abrahamic traditions. Could their resistance stem from living in a more conservative region with fewer secular or agnostic individuals? Could the methodology for interpretation of the Quran make it more challenging to induce plasticity? Would the culture surrounding the topic be different if we examined Muslim individuals outside of the Middle East? These questions make the study of religious influences on artificial reproductive technology more intricate and profound, as it proves that the same written word can lead to multiple outcomes.

A great example of this idea is discussed when Khan mentions the Leviticus 18:20 quotation, “Thou shalt not implant thy seed into thy neighbor’s wife”. Many Jewish scholars interpret this passage to indicate that while direct contact of a man’s sperm with a woman’s reproductive organs is adulterous if the two are not married, contact of an implanted embryo conceived outside of the womb is *not* adulterous. Interestingly, as seen in the aforementioned story of Ben Zoma, in which a woman supposedly becomes impregnated by washing herself in a bathtub containing Zoma’s semen, even accidental conception is not considered adulterous. However, as Inhorn states in her paper, “The use of a third party is tantamount to *zina*, or adultery, and a donor child is considered to be an *ibn haram* (lit., son of sin), or an illegitimate child, a bastard who belongs to the mother who bore him or her” (Inhorn, 2006, p. 103). Comparing these structures side by side paints a contrasting picture of modern opinion that contributes to a continuously evolving conversation surrounding the ethics and legitimacies of this topic, making it impossible to generalize the experiences of one sect to an entire population. Stories of infertility are unique, intimate, and personal, and interpretations of holy texts can only serve as guidance for couples during one of the most vulnerable times of their lives.

Not to misjudge, but it is my belief that most people do not give much thought to their own conception – in fact, most try to avoid it entirely. However, my experiences over the past year have made it so that I can speak personally to the unique and intimate narrative told by the story of my life.

I grew up within a conservative Jewish community; my dad was raised orthodox, my mother was raised reform, and together they had a shared vision of the healthy role religion was going to play in the upbringing of my twin brother and I. We went to synagogue four days a week -- Fridays and Saturdays for Shabbat services, Sundays for religious school, and Mondays for Hebrew school, ingraining the values of *gemilut hasadim* (loving kindness) and *kehillah* (community). We loved our Jewish identity and the sense of unity that came with it. However, after our first semester of college, my brother and I were made aware of information that changed the way we saw ourselves and our faith.

After almost 19 years of life, we were sat down and told that our dad was not our biological father. We were conceived through sperm donation and in-vitro fertilization. During this conversation, we heard accounts of my mothers frequent visits to the *mikvah*, or spiritual bath in which women purify themselves, in this case for fertility purposes. We also heard accounts that their rabbi at the time held to a very strict and obstinate interpretation that if they went through with gamete donation to solve their infertility, their children “would not have a father”. However, their wish to have a child superseded the religious council they had been given. This relates to the critical understanding that just because people may ascribe to a religion, that does not mean they do not have free will.

Though I still have questions about my identity and sometimes struggle in combating the familial and cultural taboo associated with it, I decided to take this class *because* of my identity.

As a Jewish student, religion has always served as a key pillar in my life by guiding who I am and the person that I hope to become. I am grateful for the sacrifice made by my dad, grateful that this sacrifice has given me life, and grateful to be learning more about the flexibility of interpretation that legitimizes my experience as a child of gamete donation. My new understandings of additional Jewish voices in this ongoing discussion are best emphasized by Susan Khan when she writes, “Diverse cultural uses of these technologies have exposed the traditional anthropological constructions of Euro-American kinship, as defined by blood, to be somewhat rigid. Rabbinic notions of kinship, by contrast... have proven surprisingly adaptable to this new world of reproductive options” (Khan, 2000, 111). I am continuously inspired by the dialogue that is making these advancements in reproductive technology accessible to a wider community of people, and I am optimistic for what the future has in store. My Jewish perspective is one of openness and compassion, and it is my hope that authorities of my religion no longer stand in the way of people who simply want to become parents.