

# Be A Merchant of Life

*This week's Torah portion has the foundational commandment, "Be fruitful and Multiply." But what if that is no longer possible?*

## **The Founding of the Peace Prize**

Recently, President Trump was nominated to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for his part in the Israeli-Gulf peace treaties. Needless to say, the nomination is being hotly contested.

The irony of life is that this important award, an award that the entire world talks about and respects, is named for a man who did not necessarily bring much blessing or peace to the world.

Alfred Nobel, who died over 110 years ago, was the inventor of dynamite. He introduced a new explosive material to the world which brought untold death and destruction in the numerous wars in which dynamite was used, killing hundreds of thousands of people.

The story goes that when Alfred's brother died, a certain French newspaper made a mistake and thought that Alfred had died. The paper printed an article about the death of Alfred Nobel—under the headline "The Merchant of Death is Dead." When our hero Alfred saw this, he engaged in deep reflection. He decided that since he was a lifelong bachelor who did not have any children, he would dedicate the fortune that he had amassed from creating dynamite to starting a foundation that would encourage positive things, including peace.

Today, he is remembered by the world not as someone who invented new explosives and brought killing to the world, but rather as a very distinguished person who brought peace to the world.

## **Be Fruitful and Multiply**

In this week's Torah portion, we read the very first commandment G-d gave Adam and Eve (and all of humanity, for that matter): "Be fruitful and multiply." But apparently, these two words are redundant. They both mean the same thing! If so, why does the Torah use two words to say one thing?

However, *pru*, or "be fruitful," means "to bear fruit." Every human being must produce "fruits" just like him or her. But one is not enough. That's why the Torah follows up with *u'rvu*, "and multiply," as in, "many"—one must have many fruits.

But here comes the big question: how many? Just how many is "many"? What is the number of children a person must have to fulfill this mitzvah? True, everyone knows that the answer is one boy and one girl—but, as usual, Jews can't agree on anything, and so, there's a dispute among our Sages about this as well.

The School of Shammai holds that the mitzvah requires one to have two sons. The School of Hillel, however, argues the popular opinion: one son and one daughter— which is what the halachah is anyways.

Now, we can understand the reasoning of Hillel's students. But what's the logic of the School of Shammai? Why do they hold that one must specifically have two sons? As a proof text, they

cite the Torah verse that tells us that Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our Teacher, had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer—after which he separated from his wife and devoted himself to public service by taking the Jews out of Egypt. This behavior, according to Shammai's students, forms a proof that having two sons constitutes parents' fulfillment of the mitzvah of "be fruitful and multiply."

The School of Hillel, on the other hand, argues that *pru u'rvu* obligates a person to ensure the continuity of the human species. This is why a person doesn't fulfill this obligation unless a male and female are brought into the world, according to Hillel's students—just like G-d created male and female, so too must a person bring forth a male and female. The School of Hillel believes that Man must emulate G-d, while the School of Shammai argue that one must emulate the greatest human being who ever lived, the one man who kept the entire Torah better than anyone else: Moshe Rabbeinu, the Master of the People of Israel.

In the Book of Koheless, along comes Shlomo HaMelech, King Solomon, and adds: "In the morning sow your seed and in the evening do not be idle." This means: It's not enough to fulfill the minimum obligation of one son and one daughter, but rather, one should continue having children. Why? In Koheless Shlomo HaMelech offers a very practical reason: "For you cannot know which shall succeed: this one or this one, and whether both are good." In other words, one can never know if all of one's children will marry and have children that will continue the family.

## **The Spiritual Meaning**

But here a lot of people sit and think to themselves that for them, the entire issue is simply not relevant: “We passed the age of having children... So what does all this have to do with us?”

The story is told that there was a couple, who were Chassidim of the Baal Shem Tov. He would always bless them with success in business. Indeed, they did very well. But one thing ruined their happiness: they had no children. And every time they asked the Baal Shem Tov for a blessing for children, he would bless them... with abundant income.

And so, years went by.

One time, they visited the Baal Shem Tov in a very depressed, broken state. The Baal Shem Tov turned to them and asked why they were so depressed: “Why, you have abundant income and you give a lot of charity! You need to be happy!” So they once again repeated themselves: “But we haven’t had any kids!” The Baal Shem Tov did not reply. Instead, he invited them to join him on a trip that was coming up shortly.

The Baal Shem Tov was accustomed to frequently travel with his students to many little villages throughout Eastern Europe, visiting Jews to help them whether with money, advice, blessings and so on. This time, he invited them to join him.

So, off they traveled on a journey lasting several days. They finally arrived in a little village and stepped off the wagon. The Baal Shem Tov stepped forward with his entire entourage to

walk around the village. He bumped into a group of kids. The Baal Shem Tov asked one boy, "What's your name?" "My name is Boruch Moshe," said the boy.

The Baal Shem Tov asked a second boy, "What's your name?" The boy replied, "Boruch Moshe." The third boy said the same thing: "Boruch Moshe." Most of the boys in the group were named Boruch Moshe!

Now the Baal Shem Tov turned to a little girl and asked, "What's your name?" She said, "Brachah Leah." When asked for her name, the second girl also said, "Brachah Leah." Just like the boys, most of the girls in this village had the same name too!

The Baal Shem Tov smiled and continued his stroll through the village. He met another group of kids, and the same thing happened again: most of the boys were named Boruch Moshe and most of the girls were named Brachah Leah.

Along the way, they met an old Jewish man. The Baal Shem Tov and his group asked him, "What's going on here? Why do all the kids in this town have the same name?" The man explained that a childless couple had once lived in the town. Once, they heard the rabbi deliver a speech in which he quoted the Sages as saying, "Anyone who teaches Torah to his friend's son is considered as if he had given birth to him." This means that anyone who teaches Torah to a Jewish child, or sees to it that another Jewish child learns Torah, then that child is considered his or her own child.

When this couple heard this, they became very happy. They decided to hire tutors for children from poor families to teach

Torah to them. Ultimately, they established schools for the children of parents who couldn't pay tuition—like the scholarships we have today.

Now, all these kids grew up. And when the elderly couple passed away, each one of these adults who had received an education because of them felt very obligated. They felt it was a merit to them to name their own children after this husband and wife. Thus, most of the village's children came to be named after this couple that had no descendants of their own.

## **Do You Have Spiritual Children?**

Pru u'rvu, the Rebbe explains, doesn't just apply to biological birth. In a deeper sense, it refers to spiritual birth. It means that every Jew should 'give birth' to another Jew— meaning that when you bring another Jew a little closer to Judaism, it's as if you brought another Jewish child into the world. That's why this mitzvah is relevant even for one who is past parenting age—even one of us can do the mitzvah of pru u'rvu. Every Jew we make more familiar with Judaism, with even one mitzvah, is considered to be our spiritual child.

As is known, the Rebbe did not have children.

The year after the Rebbetzin passed away, there was a big Lag B'Omer parade in

Brooklyn, which would always pass in front of the Rebbe's synagogue, 770 Eastern Parkway. The Rebbe would stand outdoors on a raised dais, and thousands of children would parade on by, kind of like the Memorial Day Parade.

The year the Rebbetzin passed away, after all the groups of kids had marched past the Rebbe, a special group appeared: mothers with babies born that year who had been named Chaya Mushka after the Rebbetzin. Each baby had a balloon labeled “Chaya Mushka” tied gently to the wrist.

The Rebbe waved hello and smiled to all of them. The joy and happiness on the Rebbe’s face was hard to describe.

The Rebbe did not have biological children. But today, thousands of children throughout the world are named Mushky and Mendy.