

How Many Children Do You Want?

Category: Bereishis, Noach

Be fruitful and multiply is repeated in this week's Parsha. Don't be intimidated by what it signifies.

The American Family

In 2023, Gallup released a survey on the state of the American family, asking people about their ideal number of children. Interestingly, 45% of Americans said they'd like to have three or more kids, while 47% preferred smaller families.

To put this in perspective, back in 2003, only 33% wanted a family with three children. Since then, the numbers have steadily climbed, showing a growing preference for larger families. Even more surprising is that most of the people who favor bigger families are between the ages of 18 and 28 - it turns out, the younger generation wants more kids.

Gallup has been tracking these family trends since 1936. That year, 64% wanted a family with three kids, and by 1945, that number shot up to 77%, kicking off the "baby boom" that lasted until 1967, when 61% of people still wanted three kids. But by the early 1970s, interest in larger families started dropping. This latest survey from 2023 marks the highest numbers Gallup has seen in over 50 years.

So, why is there such a gap between what people want and the reality? Based on parents' ideal family size, the U.S. birth rate should be around 2.7 kids per person. Yet, the actual birth rate is only 1.7! How do we explain the gap between wish and reality?

Much of the answer lies in age.

Married couples, according to the survey, are much more likely to actually have the number of kids they hope for compared to those who aren't married. But with people in the U.S. getting married at an average age of 28, family planning often starts a bit later. The average age for a woman to have her first child is now 27, which is much older than in the past. Many people said they would have loved to have more kids, but by the time they felt ready, it was already too late. So, a lot of

the lower birth rate isn't necessarily a conscious decision; it's just the natural result of people getting married and having kids later.

However, another curious finding in the survey is that people earning less than \$40,000 per year tend to prefer three kids, while those with higher incomes often prefer smaller families.

The Flood

This week's Torah portion tells the story of the Flood. The generation before the Flood was deeply corrupt. They had everything: they lived for centuries, were incredibly strong, and enjoyed constant pleasant weather, like California with endless sunshine and no seasons. But what did they do with all this goodness? As the Torah says, "all flesh had corrupted its way on the earth" (Bereishit 6:12). They stole, oppressed, and broke every boundary. So, G-d brought the Flood.

Chassidism, which seeks to explain the deeper meaning behind everything, puts forth the following question: Why did G-d need to bring a Flood? If He wanted to cleanse the world, there were simpler ways to do it. Why did He choose a Flood lasting 40 days? As Rashi questions, "G-d has many options for salvation; why trouble Noah with this massive construction?" (Bereishit 6:14).

The explanation is that the Flood was like a massive mikveh; it was a purification ritual. Its primary purpose was to cleanse the earth from impurity. The corrupt world before the Flood had contaminated the land. The Flood purified the world, just like a mikveh purifies with its 40 measures of water. G-d immersed the world in a mikveh and cleansed it, preparing it for a fresh start.

Then, after the Flood, Noah opened the ark and looked out, only to see that the whole world had been wiped clean. It was desolate, and he didn't exactly feel eager to step out into this empty world. G-d actually had to tell him, "Go out of the ark," and to bring all the animals with him. So, Noah stepped out, and G-d gave him some instructions for rebuilding: "Be fruitful, and multiply on the earth and increase upon it" (Bereishit 9:7).

But this brings up a question: why did G-d need to give Noah the same commandment He had already given Adam and Chava? Right when G-d created the world, the very first instruction He gave to Adam and Chava—even before the

story of the Tree of Knowledge—was “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Bereishit 1:28). Why repeat it here?

In general, the Torah doesn't usually repeat commandments. For example, Yitzchak wasn't instructed to circumcise his children because G-d had already told Avraham to do that. Similarly, Yaakov was told not to eat the sciatic nerve, and his children didn't need a separate command. So, why did Noah get this reminder to “be fruitful and multiply” when Adam had already been given this command?

The Key Difference

The Rebbe shares a deep insight here. When Adam was commanded to “be fruitful and multiply,” he was newly married and childless, while Noah received this command after already having three sons. For Adam, the command was about starting his family, having his first child; for Noah, it was about adding a fourth.

This sheds new light on the mitzvah of “be fruitful and multiply.” Often, it's seen as a one-time obligation—having a son and a daughter fulfills the Torah's command and sustains humanity. But in Parshat Noah, G-d shows us that this mitzvah is meant to be ongoing. As long as someone is able, they're encouraged to bring more children into the world, no matter how many they already have.

The Rambam puts it beautifully: “Even if one has fulfilled the mitzvah of ‘be fruitful and multiply,’ the Sages still encourage a person to continue as long as they are capable, for each additional Jewish soul is like building an entire world” (Hilchot Ishut 15:16).

Spiritual Children

I know there are people here thinking, “This is nice and all, but it doesn't really apply to me. I've already done my part for G-d and society.” But the Rebbe points out that just as this command applies to having children, it also has a spiritual side. It's about teaching Torah to students and, more broadly, helping other Jews connect with Judaism, Torah, and mitzvot. Our Sages say, “Anyone who teaches another person's child Torah, it's as if they gave birth to that child.” And the Rambam explains that “anyone who brings even one Jewish soul closer is like

building an entire world” (Likutei Sichot, Volume 30, pp. 28-29; Baparasha issue 213, “Bonim Olam,” from the Rebbe’s talks).

So, the message from Parshat Noah is that even if you’ve already inspired others to do mitzvot, you can’t see yourself as “retired” from spreading Judaism. In this parsha, G-d instructs Noah that even after having three “spiritual children,” he’s meant to keep going and do more.