

How Do We Pass on Blessing?

A Jewish guide for group discussions on the decision to have or
not have children

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Introduction

Mixed Messages

Jewish men and women are encouraged in educational and career pursuits. They are taught to be independent thinkers, question the status quo, and even devote their life's work to ways it might change. All of these teachings are rooted in Jewish values: education and learning, debate and the importance of a plurality of voices, and concern for social action and justice. These values are found in Jewish texts from the Torah to the Talmud to Yiddish newspapers. Some Jewish leaders have hypothesized that this emphasis on independence, higher education, and pursuit of one's individual voice are contributing to the fact that Jews tend to marry later and have fewer children, thus causing a near negative rate of population growth in the worldwide Jewish community (Wertheimer).

On the other hand, the pressure to reproduce is on! Jewish women and men, especially if they marry later in life or not at all, are constantly being asked by relatives when they will produce grandchildren. Not all the pressures are verbal. An increased rate of infertility in older women is both a favorite subject of the media and a biological reality. Looking around in one's local Jewish synagogue or community center, it might seem as if all Jewish holidays were made only for children and their families. Everyone in your set of friends and age group appear to be having children. It can be hard to know how to be part of the Jewish world, after a certain age, without being a parent.

All these pressures and messages can make it hard to make authentic, true decisions that take into consideration obligations to yourself, your family, your community, and the world. In addition, the decision to not have children is rarely

addressed or spoken of, inside or outside of the Jewish world. Irena Klepfisz writes in an essay on this subject:

This article has grown out of my need to express some of my feelings and conflicts about being a woman who has chosen to remain childless, as well as to break the silence surrounding the general issue of women without children.

That the silence has persisted despite the presence of the women's movement is both appalling and enigmatic, since the decision not to have a child shapes both a woman's view of herself and society's view of her. I have read a great deal about woman as mother, but virtually nothing about woman as non-mother, as if her choice should be taken for granted and her life were not an issue. And though I have heard strong support of the right of women to have choices and options, I have not seen any exploration of how the decision to remain childless is to be made, how one is to come to terms with it, how one is to learn to live with its consequences. (Klepfisz, 3)

The Purpose of this Guide

This guide is an attempt to offer a space for exploring both the decision to have children and the “decision to remain childless” to which Klepfisz refers. It is important that this opportunity be offered in a Jewish context. Martha Ackelsberg points out that by not accepting alternative family structures into the Jewish community, and encouraging only one vision of family, the community closes its doors to many who would be prime contributors to it.

Many of the common prescriptions for action—for example, increasing communal incentives and/or disincentives in an effort to entice, cajole, or encourage individuals to choose so-called traditional families, or, conversely, to punish or marginalize those who do not—are based on a presumed opposition between what the individual wants and what is good for the community. As a result, such suggestions tend to reinforce an adversarial sense of the relationship between the community and its nonconforming members, and contribute to the alienation and marginalization they are presumably designed to overcome. They force out of the community many who are capable of contributing both creativity and energy to the Jewish community. (Ackelsberg, 303)

This guide is an important, if preliminary, step in opening a discussion for all the reasons cited above: mixed messages make it difficult to make decisions, there is a lack of public discussion about the *decision* to have or not to have children, and people making alternative family choices can sometimes experience ambivalent or even hostile receptions from the Jewish community. This guide will touch on many of our primal questions—what is the meaning and purpose of our lives, how can we best serve others in them, and how will we contribute to our world and community? I hope that this guide will offer some tools for approaching these questions in an open, honest, thoughtful and intentional way, thus broadening communication between partners, families, and communities.

Goals of the Curriculum

- To guide and support people in the discussion of this important and serious decision, and to have them develop a community of support within the group
- To encourage couples or single people to express their ideas, and build communication within couples, and between couples, singles, and significant people in their lives
- To ground this discussion in Judaism, exploring Jewish values, assumptions, and perceptions around the decision to have or not have children
- To understand that there are Jewish values involved in either choice and that there is an active role and place in the Jewish community for a person or couple who decide to have children, or not to have children

Audience

This guide is intended for groups of couples or single people thinking about conceiving and raising their own children. The majority of participants will probably be couples in some form of a covenanted relationship (marriage, civil union, long-term partnership). They need not be heterosexual couples. In some communities, there may also be single women who are in the process of making this decision. It is becoming more and more common for women who are ready to have children but are not in a committed relationship to become pregnant with the help of a sperm donor, and it is important to invite these women into this conversation as well, while recognizing that the prospect of single parenting will bring up additional issues for them. Single people should be encouraged to bring a support person to the group with them so they have someone with whom to do the exercises. If such a person is not available, the facilitator can work with the single participant, or if there is more than one single participant, they can work together.

Couples and single women who are dealing with infertility, and thus facing the possibility of not having children, or couples and single people who are thinking about adopting a child, should be referred to appropriate support groups for these choices, as they often involve factors that are different from the ones involved in having a child who is biologically one's own. The group facilitator should interview each person or couple before the group forms to determine their appropriateness for the group and to explain the purpose of the group and what will be expected of the participants (honesty, confidentiality, openness, etc.).

The group should contain between six and twelve people, not including the facilitator, in order to have enough people in the group to generate energy and differing opinions around topics of discussion, but to be small enough to allow for personal attention and building intimacy in the group.

Setting and Facilitation

This group could be offered in a synagogue, a JCC, or independently in a community or home space, and advertised throughout the Jewish community. Whether the group is offered through a particular movement or in a pluralistic setting, the facilitator will have to be aware of the importance of using language that is inclusive of Jews of all backgrounds, since part of the discussion is about exploring deep-seated, inherited Jewish values and expectations, which may or may not be held by a particular denomination, but may still be very present for certain people in the group.

The facilitator of this group should have experience in group facilitation, pastoral counseling, and active listening. She or he should have a commitment to and involvement in the Jewish community. The facilitator should be able to create an atmosphere of trust, open communication, curiosity about and exploration of feelings and ideas. The facilitator should be sensitive to the needs of any single people in the group, making sure it is okay for them to work with each other in partnered activities, or with the facilitator, if there is only one single person. People who come as a couple should work with each other for partnered activities, within their couple.

The group would meet for five sessions over a period of nine weeks, every two weeks. It should meet for two hours, with a break and snacks included in this time. This

will give the group time to bond and create a support network, and give participants time to do work at home and think through the questions raised by the group on their own as well as in the group.

The Sessions

Each session should begin with a couple of moments of silent mindfulness meditation to help people become present in the space. Each session should end with the group coming back together and each person sharing one short thing that she or he learned or will think about from that session. In addition, there should be a five-minute evaluation at the end of each session where the facilitator puts a plus and triangle on the board, and asks people to say what went well and what they feel could be changed. Positive feedback is listed under the plus sign, suggestions for change under the triangle, or delta sign. This way the facilitator can improve his or her work as the group continues, and the participants will feel empowered to share their experience of the class.

The five sessions are listed below. Each session has a goal or reason for the topic. Next there are exercises to do with the group in the session. Some sessions include homework discussion topics or projects.

Session One: Opening the Questions

Goals: to begin to build trust in the group, to help people identify and articulate their fears and expectations in this decision.

1.1 Building Trust:

Begin with introductions about who they are and what brings them to the group. Talk about confidentiality—not sharing anything said in the group with anyone outside of it, and about non-judgmental listening and response—each person’s opinion or feelings must be respected. Each person should try to speak only for her or himself.

1.2 Identity exercise:

- Ask each participant to make a list of all the names they use for themselves, and all the different ways they identify themselves. For example:

Partner of so and so, daughter of so and so, writer, student, teacher, musician, businessperson, etc

- Go around and ask each person to share his or her list. Talk about different attributes that make up our identities, and how they are dependent on our relationships with others.

1.3 Fears and hopes:

List on the board as people go around and say one fear or anxiety of deciding one way or another about having children, and one excitement, or hope.

Examples:

- *Fear*—If I don’t have children... I will disappoint my parents, I will wait too long to decide and not be able to become pregnant and then regret it...

If I do have children... I will not be a good parent, I will have to give up everything I love about my life right now, I open myself to experiencing loss...

- *Hope*—By having children... I will expand my capacity for love and relationship, I will have a positive impact on the world through the way I raise my child...

By not having children... I will reach a certain point in my career, I will have a positive impact on the world and help people who need help...

- Discuss how our fears and hopes can inhibit our ability to make decisions.
- Talk to your partner and see if the two of you share each other's fears and hopes.
- Do you feel different about any of them now that you've identified them?
- Are any of them unfounded?
- Are any of them real possibilities, and if so, how does that change how you feel about them?

Session Two: Jewish Perspectives

Goals: to examine different Jewish perspectives on the decision to have or not have children, to look at different models of Jewish leadership and contribution.

2.1 Discussion: In partners, read the quotations from Dorff and Klepfisz (See Appendix). After you read them, make a list with your partner of the values that each of them is emphasizing in their writing. Then talk about these questions:

- Are the values opposed to one another?
- Do some of them overlap?
- Which values do you share?

- Which seem less important to you?

2.2 Text study: Our Ancient Role Models (See Appendix)

2.3 Homework: Discuss with your partner how your Jewish background, and other ways you were raised, might impact how you are making this decision.

Session Three: Imagining our Legacy

3.1 Ethical wills:

The writing of ethical wills--documents to pass on one's values, accumulated life wisdom, affection, and ideals--is an old tradition in Judaism. The facilitator can use ethical wills as an exercise in thinking about what one wants to do with one's life, and about what legacy one wants to leave behind (to children or to others). A collection of these wills can be found in So That Your Values Live On, edited by Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer.

In this session participants will read different examples of ethical wills—Hannah Senesh on her conviction to fight the Nazis and build the State of Israel, Rabbi David de Sola Pool, who writes of the quality of life he lived to a broad audience, such as his congregation, and Rabbi Richard Israel, who writes four letters to his daughter at different stages of her life (while he is still alive). These documents will help participants get a feel for all the different ways that people understand their contributions to the world. (Riemer and Stampfer) (The facilitator should make these readings available)

3.2 Ethical Role Models:

Ask the participants to talk with the group about people in their lives whom they admire, and why. How much does their having children or not having children play into what you admire about them?

- Break into partners, and discuss to whom you envision leaving your ethical will. Children, grandchildren, friends, people you worked with, students? What would you write in such a will right now? Take some time to outline it on paper. What and for whom is your legacy?

3.3 Homework:

Talk to the people in your life whom you admire. Ask them about their decision to have children, or not to have children. Talk to your parents or primary caretakers about their decision to have or care for you. What was their experience like? How do they see it as part of their legacy?

Session Four: Values-Based Decision Making (VBDM) and making choices

4.1 Reading personal narratives:

In this session you should begin by looking at personal narratives of people who have made different choices in regard to having children: people who have chosen to have children early in life and later in life, who have limited their children to a certain number, or chosen to have more children, and people who have chosen not to have children. (I have yet to collect these narratives. As the curriculum is developed and piloted, different facilitators should solicit such narratives from their communities, and they should be traded to preserve anonymity if the narrator wishes. They can also come from members

of the community who do not mind being identified. Eventually there will be a collection of narratives from which people can choose).

4.2 VBDM

- Ask couples to write down the values they see being preserved on either side of the decision in these narratives.
- Ask them to brainstorm values that are important to them in this decision. Some of these may come from the values generated in Session Two on Jewish Perspectives, but some will be generated by the couple in this session. Participants can also work off of a list of selected values that are relevant to this issue.
- Ask them to prioritize these values in the context of their own lives, being conscious of what they have learned about themselves so far in the group. This will involve choosing certain values over others. They can then assess which values stand for them in decision to have children, not have children, or in both. Can the couple come to a consensus about their values?
- Be aware that this exercise is for clarifying one's position, but it may not make the choice immediately obvious. Often two values of equal priority may compete on either side. Participants should be encouraged to think openly about whether a value on one side can also be maintained on the other, or if it is exclusive to one decision.
- **4.3 Homework:** Imagine your future lives together with your partner.
 - What do they look like with and without children?
 - What changes? What remains the same?

- Be concrete, and imagine a day in those lives. How do you feel in each fantasy?

Session Five: Conclusion: Where do we find faith?

Making difficult decisions requires enormous faith in yourself, in your ability to make the right decision for yourself, and often in a number of things beyond yourself, as many factors that affect the outcome of a decision are beyond your control.

Faith is a huge component of deciding not to have children. One must have faith that it is the right decision, that one won't regret it. This faith might be especially hard since there is little societal support for the decision not to have children.

Faith is also required in deciding to have children. We have no idea what the future will hold for us or our potential children, and by bringing a life into this world we are confronted with this uncertainty. Having children can be a proclamation that we have faith that there is a future to our world, and that it will one day be a better place, even when much evidence seems to point to the contrary. Not having children can also be an act of faith—for example, that you have made the right decision for yourself, or that there are other ways to contribute to the world.

5.1 Share an experience of faith with your partner—a time when you had faith in another person, a higher power, or an idea.

- Describe the setting, the people involved, the situation.
- How did it feel, in your body, to be in this faith?
- How did you recognize it?

- Did you act from it?
- Did this acting from faith feel different from acting without it?

5.2 Conclusion:

End with a ritual that allows everyone to go around and share where they are at, with no judgment about whether they've made a decision or not. Ask each person to articulate what she or he will take from this group into their own processes that will continue once the group ends.

For Further Thought and Development

This guide is at an early stage of development. In the future, more materials will be developed, and it should be piloted with a group for careful evaluation. Specific areas for development, to which I welcome contributions, include:

- Narratives of people on different parts of the child-raising spectrum need to be collected.
- Additional materials addressing environmental concerns, population growth, not wanting to bring children into the world because it's a bad place, raising children in a first-world nation—the cost and what else could be done with that money, can we afford it, will this take away from my service to others.
- Ways of addressing the societal repercussions of not having children, and of addressing or just naming the inherent loss in making any decision.
- Bringing the guide to a spiritual-director group to ask them to help infuse it with more of a spiritual direction or discernment technique, especially for the last session.

- Ideas on where the group would be held and where and how one would advertise for it.
- The time attributed to different sessions: I received some valuable feedback that sessions three (on ethical wills) and four (VBDM) may require more than one session each to adequately accomplish their goals, or these sessions may simply need more time than the others.

I hope that this guide can provide the beginning of opening this discussion for people, and at the very least bring to consciousness the need for a forum for such a discussion.

Please send feedback and ideas about this guide to:

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Appendix
Materials for Sessions

Session Two

2.1 Jewish Perspectives

Here are two Jewish voices on the question of having children, Jewish continuity, and ways of contributing to a Jewish community. After you read them, make a list with your partner of the values that each person is emphasizing in their writing. Are the values opposed to one another? Do some of them overlap? Which values do you share? Which seem less important to you?

The first excerpt is by Elliot Dorff from his book on Jewish Ethics, Love Your Neighbor as Yourself. He is a rabbi and rector of the University of Judaism, one of the Conservative movement's seminaries.

Those who can produce or adopt children should see it as a mitzvah of the highest order to have more than the minimal number of two, for nothing less than the future of the Jewish community and of Judaism depends on that. The Jewish community, after all, lost a third of its members in the Holocaust, and, as I describe in some detail in the section on contraception, contemporary Jews are not producing enough children even to maintain their present numbers. Add to these factors the high rate of intermarriage and assimilation among Jews today, and it becomes clear that we Jews are in serious demographic trouble as a people. One needs a Jewish education to become an informed, practicing Jew, of course, but people can be educated only if they exist in the first place. The mitzvah of procreation, like all other commandments, does not apply to those who cannot fulfill it; but for those who can, propagation or adoption is literally a matter of life and death for us not only as individuals and as families but also as a people. (Dorff, 95)

This next excerpt is by Irena Klepfisz, a Jewish feminist active in the world of Yiddish culture. She is the child of a Holocaust survivor, and writes about a number of issues concerning women, gays and lesbians, Judaism, and Eastern European Jewish culture. This is from her collection of essays: Dreams of an Insomniac.

I know that Jews have special concerns which color their attitudes toward gays and lesbians, and I would like to address two of these today. The first is the issue of demographics. There is great concern that intermarriage, the loosening of community ties and the weakening of Jewish identity are decimating the Jewish population. The Holocaust or *der khurbn* ravaged us; our children and the future generation are a major preoccupation...I am the only survivor of my father's family. I know the keen sense of loss in *di khaloymes*, those dreams: the desire to pass on the names of dead relatives, the desire to regenerate the family.

I also know that the entire burden of fulfilling *di khaloymes* has fallen on *di ydishe froyen*, the Jewish women, and has put great pressure on Jewish women to bear children. And though I understand the emotions and concerns which lie behind that pressure, I feel it is imperative for us to resist this special form of sexism which reduces a Jewish woman's value simply to biological function. We have to resist the view that the most significant contribution a Jewish woman can make to *undzer folk*, our people, is to give birth to a Jewish child....it is outrageous to suggest that those of us who have chosen to be childless are indifferent to Jewish survival. In fact we have a critical function to play in maintaining the survival of our community in every sphere of Jewish life, and bearing children is not always the best contribution we can make. I know of many women who possess hardly any Jewish identity, are entirely ignorant of Jewish history,

religion, culture—they could have a dozen children but these children would be raised in a void.

Clearly the act of bearing a child does not guarantee Jewish survival...assimilation, alienation, a thin fading Jewish identity have become our greatest enemies...Yet woman and lesbians have a great deal to offer to counter these, by the art they produce, by the institutions they establish and nurture (secular and observant, cultural and religious), by their acute political sense. (Klepfisz 76-77)

Session Two

2.2 Our Ancient Role Models

How did our ancestors contribute to Jewish Continuity?

Abraham and Sarah

Throughout the book of Genesis, offspring are associated with blessing, and copious offspring are what God offers to Abraham as part of the covenant. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as their wives, Sarah, Rachel, and Leah, are all concerned with reproducing. Many of the stories about them center on this process of bearing children and passing on inheritance and blessing to the next generation. These ancestors are powerful models for us in Judaism—we pray to God through their merit and in association with them in the Amidah, the central prayer of Judaism.

- Consider these experiences of Abraham and Sarah:

“Some time later, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. He said, ‘Fear not, Abram,/ I am a shield to you;/ Your reward shall be very great.’ But Abram said, ‘O Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless...’” (Genesis 15:1-2)

- What is Abram’s concern here? How does he understand God’s promise of protection and reward?

“Abram threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further, “As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be a the father of a multitude of nations. And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you, and kings shall come forth form you. I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come.” (Genesis 17:3-7)

“As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue forth from her.” (Genesis 17:15-16)

- What changes for them in these encounters, and what do the changes signify?
What is the nature of blessing in these passages? How do you understand the concept of blessing?

Then one said, “I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!” Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having the periods of women. And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?” Then the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’ (Genesis 18:9-13)

- Why does Sarah laugh here? Is it a laugh of joy, wonder, or uneasiness? Imagine what her different emotions might be.

Moses and Miriam

Judaism also has other founders and leaders who are role models for us. Two such leaders are Moses and Miriam. Moses leads the people out of Egypt and guides them through the desert for forty years, to the edge of the promised land. He is considered the greatest prophet by Maimonides, and has some of the most direct communication with God that appears in the Torah. While Moses has a wife and two sons, we only hear about them infrequently. We hear about his first son, Gershom, being born and named (Exodus 2:22), about his wife Zipporah circumcising one of the sons (Exodus 4:24-26), and about Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, bringing the sons to him in the desert (Exodus 18:5-6). Interestingly, in the list of the descendants of the heads of clans in Exodus 6:14-25, we hear about Aaron's, Moses' brother's, sons, but not about Moses' sons.

While this may be seen as a model of a leader who has little time for his family, what we can take from it is the concept that contribution to and leadership of the Jewish people does not need to be through your offspring. In contrast to the model put forth by the *avot* and *imahot*, who lead by passing on their legacy to their offspring, Moses contributes to the whole community in his leadership. His most important contributions are to the people Israel, rather than to his specific children.

Miriam, Moses' sister, helps save Moses' life when he is a baby by arranging a Hebrew wet-nurse (Moses' mother) to suckle Moses for the Daughter of Pharaoh. Miriam is

considered a prophetess who helps lead the people across the sea out of Egypt and on their journey in the desert. In the biblical text and the midrash, she is associated with the availability of water for the people. When she dies, the well dries up. In her role in saving Moses and in helping nurture the people with water, she is a mother to the people, yet she never marries or has children of her own.

- Discuss these different role models and what they can teach us about how to contribute to the Jewish community and Jewish continuity. Have you experienced one role model more strongly than another in your encounters with Judaism? How can you integrate awareness of both models into your Jewish activities?

(Not) Having Children: A Conversation

ARLENE AGUS, BARBARA BREITMAN, TIKVA FRYMER-KENSKY,
DEBRA ORENSTEIN, ELLEN M. UMANSKY, AND CHAVA WEISSLER

"Once, in my early twenties, I saw that I was a speck of light in the great river of light that undulates through time."

—JANE KENYON, CONSTANCE

The following is an edited transcript of a conversation at one of two conferences held for contributors to Lifecycles. The paper under discussion was on midlife.

Arlene Agus: There is a certain invisibility to women who are not married or women who don't have children. When I read essay drafts written for this book—even essays that describe fairly universal life moments—somehow we are not fully a part of it, because there is a part of our pain that is not seen or acknowledged. We are very careful to talk about all kinds of lifestyle differences and take into account all kinds of permutations, and yet not having children is rarely mentioned. So, you feel as though you dropped off the map somewhere, but you don't want to say so. It requires you to feel and announce your own alone-ness and alienation, and you don't want to betray yourself in that way. At the same time, you want somebody to acknowledge the existence of this kind of pain.

Ellen M. Umansky: Reaching midlife without children in a Jewish context is both difficult and important. So are all the permutations: Having children, not having children, having young children, grown children, aging parents, parents who have died—all of that significantly changes how we view midlife.

Arlene Agus is the founding director of the Foretsky Foundation.

Barbara Breitman is a feminist therapist in private practice in Philadelphia, an instructor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, a trainer on issues of cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity, and a long-time activist in the Jewish Renewal Movement.

Dr. Tikva Frymer-Kensky is the director of biblical studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and the author of *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (Free Press, 1992) and the forthcoming *Motherprayer*.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky: The difference between childlessness in midlife and childlessness earlier is the profound realization, once you have reached midlife without children, that you are *never* going to have them.

Barbara Breiman: I thought of that last night. I am staying at my mother's this weekend. A few weeks back, she gathered all the eight-millimeter films that my father had taken—literally from the time of my birth until he died, which is when I graduated from college. She had all the film transferred to videos. We had not seen these films for twenty years, and we sat down and we watched them. It took four hours to run the footage. I looked at myself change from being a toddler searching for the right end of a lollipop, to being a senior searching for my place in the graduation line. And I was crying, and we were laughing, and my mom and I both felt the entire gamut of emotions as we reviewed the first twenty-one years of my life together. When I went to bed, my one thought was, "What am I going to do with these films? I have no one to give them to." That's the experience. I was lying in bed, thinking, "Which of my friends' children am I close enough to, that I could give them these videos? Who would look at these images and laugh about the little baby who became this woman?" And then I realized that nobody was ever going to look at them the way my mother and I did. There would be no daughter of mine, no granddaughter to cherish these frozen moments, to wonder over the mystery of this time together. And I thought, "Well, maybe I'll ask in my will, which I have to write now because I just bought a house for the first time, maybe I'll ask that they bury the videos with me."

Arlene Agus: Do you continue to hope that your life will work out in a normative way (i.e. being married and having children), which is a way that you might have preferred? Or, do you

Rabbi Debra Orenstein, editor of *Lifecycles*, fellow of the Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies, and instructor at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, regularly writes and speaks on Jewish spirituality and gender studies.

Dr. Ellen M. Umansky is the author of numerous essays and books on women and Judaism, including the co-edited *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality: A Sourcebook* (Beacon Press, 1992).

Dr. Chava Weissler, Philip and Muriel Berman Professor of Jewish Civilization at Lehigh University, writes about the religious lives of eighteenth century Ashkenazic women.

begin to try to adjust to something that you don't want to face? Or, in avoidance of these options, do you live simultaneously with both possibilities? That is what most of us do, and in some ways that is the most painful choice.

In the Jewish feminist culture, the word "nurturing" is used so often, and every time I hear it, it's like an arrow through my heart, because it is so closely associated for me with motherhood. I do not know if I want to describe that in too much detail; maybe I want to gloss over it just to keep myself sane.

Chava Weissler: I am thinking of what you said about "Who could I leave these films to?" For me, some years ago, there was a moment of realization when I wondered which of my friends' children was going to visit me in the nursing home. And immediately I realized that I could not count on any of them. Of course, one cannot absolutely count on one's own children, either. But, there was a moment of saying, "No, they are not my children."

Debra Orenstein: We are talking about being single and not having children, and invisibility is central to that issue. Part of feeling or being "invisible" is that everyone else looks very "seen" and large and pronounced to you. A contributor was originally going to write about home for this volume: The place of the Jewish woman in the home, Jewish women as the keepers of *kashrui* (kosher laws) and *Shabbat* (Sabbath), how home relates to work if you are a modern Jewish woman, etc. And she found that all she could come up with was her tremendous resentment against the Jewish community, for not supporting the Jewish home, for making schools and camps astronomically expensive. She pointed out that we are—appropriately—reaching out to unaffiliated and intermarried Jews, but meanwhile ignoring or shunting aside families who are already committed, who can't go to Jewish events because there is no childcare, and can't have another child because who can afford it with the price of a day school education? I think of that conversation juxtaposed with this one because it strikes me that we—the various "we's"—experience ourselves as part of a community that does not see us, that looks right at us, whoever we are, and just does not see. Somehow, the "community" never approves or takes in the people who really make up its membership, but serves this mythical Jewish family, which no longer exists, if it ever did.

Ellen M. Umansky: I never felt so young.

Debra Orenstein: I never felt so old.

Chava Weisler: I never felt so single.

TIkva Frymer-Kensky: I never felt myself so much a mother.



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