

Letters

Infertility in the Orthodox Community

■ In “The Childless Couple,” (spring 2005), Rebecca Wolf describes the agony of childlessness accurately—and yet ultimately misses the point. How else could she conclude each story of a childless couple by stating how many children they now have? Maybe she meant to encourage couples who are still struggling with infertility. But for older couples who have failed at fertility treatments and adoption and are now childless and grandchild-less, the stories only open badly healed wounds: They didn’t pray hard enough or take enough medical risks or have enough faith to deserve the blessings of family, love and posterity.

Sometimes the answer to our most desperate prayers is “No, never!” As a culture and a community, we need to learn how to embrace fellow Jews who have received this answer.

We learn in the Torah that Rachel incurred her husband’s anger when she said to him, “Give me children or I will die.” One commentary on this exchange that helped restore value to my life was that of the Akeidat Yitzchak. He writes that Yaakov reprimanded Rachel for focusing exclusively on her role as a female, and ignoring her more fundamental role as an *isha*, a human being, able to “understand and advance in the intellectual and moral field ... as the literal meaning of *eshet chayil* indicates.”

The Divine “No” is only the first word. The rest is “because I created you for a different purpose.” It is inspiring to know of *tzaddikim* like the Lubavitcher Rebbe and Rebbetzin who had no biological children. But I, as a plain, childless older Jew, also want to know about ordinary Jews who lived and died without children: how they accepted their situation, and how they turned their long-

ing for love into love of God and kindness to people.

Sara G. B. Fishman
Worcester, Massachusetts

Instead, of providing positive examples of observant adoptive families in her sidebar on adoption, Wolf describes the difficulty in adopting a Jewish-born child and portrays the adoption of a child not born Jewish in almost harsh terms. In fact, many Orthodox families have adopted children who were not born Jewish, and many of these children have become committed observant Jews.

Harold Berman
Springfield, Massachusetts

Your piece on Orthodox couples adopting non-Jewish children suggests that this is socially discouraged in the observant Jewish community. My wife and I adopted a little boy from Guatemala four years ago and never encountered any such opposition. Our rabbi thoroughly supported our efforts, and our son was halachically received into Klal Yisrael upon his entry into the United States. I strongly encourage other Orthodox Jewish families to pursue and participate in the miracle of international adoption.

David L. Blatt
Chicago

There is no question that in the Orthodox family infertility feels more painful than it does for many people in the general population. For the past fifteen years, Jewish Children’s Adoption Network has acted as a *shadchan*, finding homes for over 1,500 Jewish children in need. Admittedly, most of these children have special needs (babies born with medical conditions, older children who have suffered abuse or neglect, et cetera), but they are *Jewish* children, and if we don’t find them Jewish families they end up in non-Jewish homes. Jewish couples, infer-

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tile or not, should consider the fact that there are Jewish children out there who are desperately in need of Jewish homes.

Stephen Krausz, PhD
Assistant Director
Jewish Children's
Adoption Network
Denver

Rebecca Wolf responds

I in no way meant to hurt anyone by including only those stories of couples who now have children. I can personally relate to the pain of infertility. As I'm sure Sara Fishman can appreciate, I interviewed scores of people struggling with infertility for the article. It was difficult to get to talk to people who are childless and still undergoing fertility treatment because they tend to be sensitive about their situation.

With respect to adoption, none of the opinions quoted in the piece are my own. Moreover, as a sidebar, the piece was only meant to highlight a dimension of infertility and, specifically, the work of A.T.I.M.E. in this area. It was not meant to explore adoption in depth. The people I interviewed felt they would only be comfortable adopting Jewish children. I am happy to see that adopted children, born Jewish and non-Jewish, are embraced by the Jewish community.

Yoel Jakobovits presents a timely and much-needed overview of fertility therapy in "Assisted Reproduction through the Prism of Jewish Law" (spring 2005). I'd like to clear up one serious error. The author first describes artificial insemination (AI) using a donor's semen. Later, in his description of in-vitro fertilization, he writes:

"As in AI, in this procedure, sperm must be obtained from a donor." While Dr. Jakobovits was likely referring to husbands as "donors" of sorts, the presentation leaves the reader with the impression that in-vitro fertilization routinely involves the use of donor sperm. In fact, this is very rarely the case. While AI using donor sperm was a mainstay in the treatment of male infertility for over a century, modern-assisted reproductive technologies, especially in-vitro fertilization, have ren-

dered the need for donor inseminations exceedingly rare.

Richard V. Grazi, MD
Genesis Fertility
& Reproductive Medicine
Brooklyn

Dr. Jakobovits responds

Dr. Grazi's assumption that I intended to subsume the husband's semen within the term "donor" is correct. I welcome his comment in clarifying any misunderstandings my description may have left.

Kiddush Clubs

■ Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb's article, "Why Kiddush Clubs Must Go" (spring 2005) seems to imply that these clubs are a modern-day phenomena. I would like to point out that they are not new at all, as my father was a member of one in the sixties, when I was a young child.

My friends and I used to secretly follow our fathers into the shul basement every Shabbos morning. We would watch, horrified, as our heroes became loud and loose with their language and would then go back to shul and sometimes rudely interrupt the rabbi's sermon and pretend that nothing had transpired.

I still feel the shame of my father's misbehavior many years later. Now, as a parent, I am careful to model proper decorum in shul for my children and their friends.

Anonymous

Frumteens

■ I find it hard to express the utter shock I felt upon discovering a three-page article by Yitzchok Adlerstein ("Online Refuge," spring 2005) in praise of the Frumteens web site. I have been both disgusted by its content and troubled by its possible influence.

In mentioning that Frumteens is not just a site dispensing life advice to troubled teens, but also has opinions to offer on quite a few areas of Judaism, Rabbi Adlerstein waves off any concerns by referring to Frumteens as "two sites in one," and states that the extreme ideas on

one part of the site should not affect the valuable advice being offered on the other part of the site.

Rabbi Adlerstein is way off the mark. First, Frumteens, in all of its threads, most certainly dispenses advice to teens. Further, even if the two "halves" (indistinguishable on the site itself) could be separated, the extreme content of the "Judaism" section taints the entire site. The moderator holds very strident views on a whole range of issues, from a belief that the State of Israel is religiously abhorrent and, for redemption to come, must be eliminated, to the conviction that any Jew or group that does not subscribe to his views is beneath contempt. I hardly think this is a site we want our children frequenting.

More disturbingly, there is a very clear danger in sites like this one. Haven't we learned to be very careful when dealing with matters such as these, making sure that those who handle them are subject to full oversight and that everything is handled with professionalism? Nowhere in Rabbi Adlerstein's article is there a hint that such is the case with Frumteens—nor would I expect the moderator, given his views on modern ideas, to guide teens to seek professional help.

There are, in fact, a number of well-regarded, moderate and, most importantly, community-regulated and overseen web sites catering to just the needs of the teenagers Rabbi Adlerstein talks of in his article. Sadly, they receive not a word in the entire piece.

Nachum Lamm
Kew Gardens Hills,
New York

While I generally enjoy Rabbi Adlerstein's column on Torah on the Internet, I take issue with his profile of the moderator on Frumteens. With respect to issues of *hashkafah*, the moderator has a "my way or the highway" approach on all issues, and espouses stereotypic views on many *gedolim* such as Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, *z"l* and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *z"l*. The moderator's views can fairly be described as extremely intolerant. He rou-

tinely refers to Zionism as idolatry and frequently denigrates *gedolei Torah* who are not part of his narrow ideological camp. His views on the Orthodox Union, the National Conference of Synagogue Youth, Yeshiva University and Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary border on hostility. When confronted with issues such as Torah and science, the moderator assumes that there is an innate hostility between the two. While one cannot discern from the web site where the adolescents visiting the site live, a one-sided approach to issues of *hashkafah* is of questionable utility to adolescents who are striving to understand their roles in the Orthodox community.

One can question whether the Frumteens moderator can fairly offer opinions on *hashkafah* and *emunah vedeot* to teenagers who are looking to him to determine their attitudes toward the world.

Steve Brizel
Kew Gardens Hills,
New York

Rabbi Adlerstein responds

Both of our correspondents are correct. The positions taken by the moderator are so extreme that we should be more than wary of anything he says. We should also be vigilant regarding those dealing with impressionable and vulnerable children—no matter what their ideology.

If the strong and direct caveat I included in my article failed to distance the OU and me sufficiently from the reprehensible attitudes that Frumteens displays towards a variety of important Orthodox personalities and institutions, then I thank our writers for their warnings to our readers.

My intention had been that the article would begin where their warnings left off. I recommended Frumteens as a place for parents to go for insight, not for teens to go for guidance. (Teens from Centrist Orthodox homes might use a site similar to Frumteens, if it existed, but they are not going to put up with Frumteens in its present incarnation. The stridency and absolutism of the moderator's approach would turn them off very quickly.)

Readers who took my suggestion entered a world—through the Frumteens portal—that I firmly believe everyone should visit. Statistics and rumors about the kid down the block go only so far. Frumteens offers readers a glimpse into the lives of kids on the streets, or in abusive families, which is not easy to obtain elsewhere. Here parents can learn what is happening to kids around them in stark and graphic detail, and can examine a methodology of assistance that has merit. Unlike other Orthodox publications, *Jewish Action* does not advance its own case and filter out everything else. We assume that our readers applaud Rambam's dictum, "Accept the truth from whoever says it." There are kernels of truth that can be accessed by reading certain sections of Frumteens. Our readers can be trusted to find them, and discard the chaff.

Some readers will argue that because Frumteens is so over the top in its rejection of everything within Centrist Orthodoxy, it is demeaning to focus any positive attention on it. I would argue that it might be unpalatable, but it is necessary. A famous parable by the Chofetz Chaim tells of a citizen who had been told not to drink the water from the local pond. The citizen was surprised to find the townspeople feverishly drawing water from the same pond, and passing buckets from hand to hand. Noting his astonishment, they pointed to a structure engulfed in flames. "The water is not suitable to drink. But when there is a fire, any kind of water will work."

The Chofetz Chaim applied this to Jews who claimed that they were not learned or pious enough to be able to influence others positively. While this might be true in other times, in the dire straits within which we live, with Jews dropping out of Jewish life in large numbers, we need everyone's contribution to put out the fires.

Those who think that there are adequate resources to offer guidance to at-risk teens are simply mistaken. The house is on fire, and we cannot be finicky about how palatable the aid is.

Los Angeles, where I live, is a fairly large Jewish community. Until very recently, there was no dedicated agency

dealing specifically with the hundreds (yes!) of dropouts from across the Orthodox landscape. One young attorney began teaching and counseling such individuals in his "spare" time, and bears the brunt of the responsibility for an informal program for men. There is still no program for women. The Orthodox community has finally woken up to the problem of at-risk teens, but it woke up late. We are very much the beggars who cannot afford to be choosers. If there are "community-regulated and overseen web sites" addressing the problem, I don't know about them. There are indeed bulletin boards and regulated chat rooms, but these do not attempt to offer the kind of directed, emergency intervention that Frumteens does. (If I am wrong, I would love to be corrected, but I will still bet that their reach is insufficient to the enormity of the task.) If our correspondents find this appalling and wish to get involved and change the situation, my review will have been well worth the writing. **JA**