

Conceiving a Technological God
(Genesis 11:1-9; I Samuel 1:1-20)

The congregation prided itself on balancing tradition and modernity. But it was riven when, without consulting anyone, a feminist theologian leading public worship included the words, “God of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah” in an ancient prayer invoking the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”. The murmurs began immediately. “She took a passage of liturgy codified for more than a millennium and inserted a blessing created only a generation ago.” “Who does she think she is?” “Does religious law allow it?” But, as shocked as some were, the congregation also prided itself on study. To deal with the conflict, the community invited their most learned members to offer teachings at Shabbat worship on the matter.

For several weeks running, the egalitarian argument had been articulated. Finally, Joel Grossman, a well-respected litigator and one of the most observant and traditional members of the congregation, took the pulpit. He was about to share a most personal and painful journey—his journey to become a father. Three years of trying to conceive naturally, followed by multiple fertility doctors, failed in-vitro fertilizations, emotional roller coasters steep enough to cause whiplash, agonizing distance from the wife he loved, with every newscast of abortions, or unwed mothers or child abuse highlighting how profoundly they wanted children. Amidst this crisis, this man who faithfully prayed three times a day nevertheless found himself asking, “Where was God?”

Joel’s crisis over childlessness is mirrored in the Bible; indeed, a woman longing to be a mother teaches us how to pray. Hannah, filled with “*marat nefesh*,” a bitter soul, entreats God for a child at the temple at Shiloh. Because she poured out her heart silently, even though her mouth moved, she was mistakenly seen as drunk. “No, my lord. I am a woman in anguish, and I have neither had wine nor liquor, but have been pouring my heart out before God.” Hannah’s very being, suffused with longing, came to mark authentic prayer.

The Talmud teaches, “How many great laws can be learned from these verses relating to Hannah! “Now Hannah, she spoke in her heart.” From this we learn that one who prays must direct his heart. (Brachot 31A)

Joel, too, directed his heart, not at Shiloh, but on the outskirts of Bethlehem at the Tomb of Rachel, a site sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims. The biblical Rachel was barren while her sister Leah bore their husband Jacob seven children. Rachel’s prayers were answered—she became a mother to Joseph, but she died while giving

birth to Benjamin. For centuries, Rachel's Tomb has been a place for the childless of all faiths to plead to God for Divine intervention.

Although men and women prayed in separate places, the cries of the women reached Joel's ears. They were his cries as well. And so, standing in the pulpit of his congregation, to the disbelief and disappointment of his right wing friends, Joel declared,

“During our long struggle with infertility, I prayed not to the God of Abraham, but to the God of Sarah. Infertility was not Abraham's problem, just as in the Bible, it is never the man's problem... Faced with Sarah's problem, I prayed to her God, just as she did to ask for God's pity...it is to this God of these great women that I need to address my prayers.”¹

For Joel Grossman, both prayer and technology played essential roles in his dream to become a father. Like most Jews, his strong religious convictions went hand in hand with an equally strong appreciation for medical advances. He knew that the first biblical commandment just after human beings were created was to “be fruitful and multiply.” For ethicists and lay people alike, if you can't fulfill this commandment naturally, a technological assist is just fine; indeed, it is celebrated.

When I was a young rabbi, meeting with my supervisor to determine my goals for the next year, I confidently declared that after my husband finished his Ph.D., we would start a family. My wise mentor was dismayed. As the old Yiddish proverb says, “Man plans and God laughs.” He reminded me that such decisions are not fully in our hands; that birth and death often do not go according to plan. What I didn't know then, was that between that conversation and the birth of my first child, I would lose both my parents, burying my father in the same week our daughter was born.

So as I heard, with great fanfare, the news that Facebook and Apple would pay to have female employees freeze their eggs, I envisioned a kind of slow motion collision of the confidence of control with the mysterious realities of birth and death.

I am a feminist; I find much in this decision to affirm. I believe women should have choices, and ample opportunities to reach their professional potential. I marvel that reproductive advances have made it possible for women who would have been unable to conceive in generations past to welcome into the world the children they long for. I recognize the backhanded compliment to smart, innovative women—we value you and your DNA—we want your genetic gifts, we want you to reproduce and continue to shower us and future innovators and entrepreneurs with your brilliance and capability. I think of the joy, wonder and gratitude of dear friends—both rabbis—at the baby naming of their daughter—conceived after many years and great expense,

¹ Joel Grossman in Samuel Freedman's, *Jew vs. Jew* p. 145-149

through in vitro fertilization, when her dad said to approving laughter, “All children take some time to come into the world...Ours took longer than most.”

And yet. On the cover of Bloomberg Businessweek is a photo of a poised white woman. The headline covers her body—“Freeze Your Eggs, Free Your Career: A new fertility procedure gives women more choices in the quest to have it all.”² A woman who developed a company to freeze eggs comments, “Apple and Facebook are definitely tech innovators, and as innovators, they are leading in the space of the employment benefits as well...” and she declares, “we think egg freezing will become standard of care for all professional women...it all goes back to retention and recruitment of employees.”³ Consider the implications of this benevolent but benighted policy. Undoubtedly, it was developed, and will be used by well meaning, hard working people, struggling to juggle time and tasks. But inherent in this policy is an ominous undercurrent—they have made of technology, a god.

We once believed that “Love conquers all.” Now we believe, “Technology conquers all.” Want to advance your career? Stop the biological clock. Want to feel empowered? Control your reproduction. Have work deadlines? Time-shift your childbearing years. Deciding whether to be a parent? What would your employer say?

One 35-year old woman whose company doesn’t offer this benefit explained that a romantic break up and an unforgiving work schedule motivated her decision to freeze her eggs. She calls her “Ivy League, business school eggs,” her baby insurance policy. The procedure, she said, cost her, “more than a car, but less than a house.” This woman’s mother, a skeptic of technological religion, tells her daughter, “I’m glad you went to business school and work 100 hours a week—and don’t have time to meet anyone—so you can afford to freeze your eggs.”⁴

Oh honey, I want to say—as my supervisor kindly schooled me nearly thirty years ago—it just isn’t that simple. “Man plans and God laughs.” It’s (still) not in our control. Presumably the companies willing to pay for freezing eggs underwent a cost/benefit analysis. But we must ask—who pays the cost? And who really benefits?

Yes, it is generous for companies to cover the considerable extrinsic financial cost of delaying motherhood, but what about the intrinsic costs? What are they selling, not only to their female employees, but also to our culture? That it’s no big deal to undergo medical procedures that mess with your hormones? That thawing eggs, implanting them and nine months later welcoming a baby is as lawful as the old

² <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2014-04-17/new-egg-freezing-technology-eases-womens-career-family-angst#p3>

³ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-10-15/apple-facebook-to-pay-for-women-employees-to-freeze-eggs.html>

⁴ <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2014-04-17/new-egg-freezing-technology-eases-womens-career-family-angst#p2>

fashioned union of a sperm and an egg, when really there's only a one in five chance of conception? That natural childbirth is inconvenient for your advancement? That the only currency worth chasing is financial and professional success, rather than time, or tenderness, or attention, or relationships? What about love, or presence, or walks on the beach or family dinners?

Silicon Valley is most assuredly a birthplace. It is the birthplace of innovation, of elegant solutions to intractable problems and of life saving technologies, and for that, we are all very grateful. But, now it is the birthplace of the idea that we should control birth itself. It is the birthplace of a kind of hubris, a birthplace of the view that every problem has a technological solution, that your time, and your body, if not your soul, belongs to the company, a birthplace of the perspective that there is no boundary that innovation cannot breach.

The means and methods are novel, but the hubris is as ancient as the bible. In the story of the Tower of Babel, a group of innovators who spoke the same language envisioned the grandest building of their time—a city and a tower that would be so high, so monumental, so prominent on the horizon that it would serve as a gateway to the heavens. Such a construction project would make their name known, would, literally, put them on the map. But no matter how high these visionaries built, they could not supplant God.

Even the structure of the story tells the tale—for four lines, we hear about how the generation of the tower designs and builds, we even learn of the technology of the day—brick and bitumen rather than stone used to build. But then, the pivot—“And the Eternal came down to see the city and tower which the children of men built.” God had to come down to view this structure storming the heavens...and the next four lines reverses human actions using nearly the same words. Where the builders said, “Come let us build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens.” God said, “Come let us go down.” Where the builders said, “Let us make us a name lest we be scattered,” the text teaches, “So the Eternal scattered them.” The story begins, “And the whole earth of one language and one speech” and it ends, “Therefore was the name of it called Babel, because the Eternal did there confound the language of all the earth.”

The tower builders believed that their technological prowess was limitless. Too often, we do too. But as much of an engineering feat was their city and tower, as magnificent and impressive, as are our contemporary technological advances—and they are—there is still a limit to how high technology can reach, how much dignity it can bring, how many problems it can solve.

We can appreciate the range of our discovery, the breadth of our innovation, the elegance of our inventions, but let us take care that appreciation doesn't turn into idolatry. Let us be careful not to we worship at the altar of technology.

The Tower of Babel story follows the story of the flood. According to the

rabbis, the tower builders were not destroyed like the violent generation of the flood, because the builders worked together. Instead of destruction, God aimed for instruction, for uprooting their hubris, their self-aggrandizement. Instead of being destroyed, the tower builders were dispersed—to disseminate their skills, to learn to understand difference, to find new ways to communicate, to recognize the limits—and the possibilities—of being merely human.

Rather than playing roulette with birth and death, there is much that Silicon Valley companies, start-ups and schools, businesses and non-profits can do to celebrate that humanity more widely, to affirm the gifts of women and men who seek to both make a living and make a life. Rather than worshipping a technological god, they can create policies that benefit the many and not the few. Let them support paid parental leave and subsidize daycare and preschool, make flexible work options and paid family sick time. Let them make it possible to balance home life with work life⁵. Let their benefits—of the universal type and the employee type—be in service to affirming human flourishing.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells a story of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, who sees his congregant running in the town square. “Why are you running?” “To make a living!” he replies. So the rabbi inquires, “How come you’re so sure that the living is in front of you and you have to run to catch up with it? Maybe it’s behind you and you should stop and let it catch up with you.”

Rather than worship our technological god, asking us to tinker with biology in service to our livelihood, causing us to deprioritize our desire for relationship, and heightening our anxiety about time, let us stop and let our blessings catch up with us. May your receive many blessings. Amen.

⁵ <http://jezebel.com/why-egg-freezing-benefits-arent-even-close-to-enough-1648470743>