

# Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Chayei Sarah

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Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

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The Fax of Life

ת"סב

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**GOOD MORNING!** Last week I met with a good friend, someone whom I have been studying with for over twenty years. I happened to mention that my daughter, who moonlights as a *shadchan* (matchmaker), suggested a young woman as a possible match for my twenty-five-year-old son. Since the woman's mom had grown up in Miami Beach, I wondered if he knew the family. He looked at me, shell shocked – yes, he knew her mother – she was a former classmate of his. He literally could not believe that children of his classmates were now of age to be married.

**Part** of his utter disbelief stemmed from the fact that he himself was still a bachelor. For over a decade I had been politely suggesting, then imploring, and finally begging him to take his life seriously, settle down, and begin building a Jewish family. I constantly reminded him of the aphorism that grandchildren are the return on the investment of raising children.

**I've repeatedly** told him that if he didn't settle down soon (he's forty-one) then even if he eventually does have kids and they follow his example, he will never really know his own grandchildren or be a meaningful part of their lives. He would miss out on one of life's greatest gifts and purest pleasures. No matter how successful or accomplished one is – you cannot turn back the hands of time. Getting the opportunity to really know one's grandchildren is going to be out of reach for many.

**I am** reminded of the following joke. Bob and Joan take their ten-year-old son over to Bob's mother for Thanksgiving dinner. Grandma goes all out and prepares a terrific holiday meal with all the "fixings." The young child fills his plate and tucks right in. Bob looks at his son sternly and says sharply, "Stephen! Don't you remember that before we eat we have to say a blessing and utter a prayer?!?" The young child answers, "Dad, that's what we do at home, but now we are at grandma's and she actually knows how to cook."

**Unfortunately**, my middle aged friend is not alone. For the last seven decades birth rates have steadily declined. In 1950, women typically had five births each; globally, last year, it was 2.3 births. By 2050, the UN projects a further global decline to 2.1 births per woman (2.1 births is the generally accepted baseline for preventing a total population collapse).

**But** it's really much worse than that. Nearly every developed country has less than 2 births per woman. In 1950, in the US it was 3.6 births per woman. According to the World Bank, by 2020 that number had slipped to 1.6, and even less in Europe and Asia. In Italy, it was 1.2; in Japan, it was 1.3; in China, 1.2. (Africa is the continent that keeps the global birth rate average up – there are 15 countries that average 5 births per woman.)

**I grew up** in the 1970's and the liberal political movement of that time was known as Zero Population Growth (also known as ZPG). Yale University was a stronghold of ZPG activists who believed "that a constantly increasing population is responsible for many of our problems: pollution, violence, loss of values, and of individual privacy." Thus their goal was a net zero population growth. (I was made aware of this because my seventh grade science teacher was a fanatic on the subject. Proponents of ZPG also preoccupied themselves with feminism and environmentalism – trying to tie them all together in a neat little bow.)

**Of course**, Elon Musk has something to say on the matter; earlier this year he tweeted, and not for the first time, that "population collapse due to low birth rates is a much bigger risk to civilization than global warming." Although today Mr. Musk is likely much more concerned with the possible collapse of Twitter, he also kind of missed the point.

**It's going** to take a long time for the world wide population to begin to decline. By 2080, the world's population is expected to peak at 10.4 billion. Then there's a 50% chance that the population will plateau or begin to decrease by 2100. More conservative models anticipate the global population would be about 8.8 billion people by 2100.

**But** of great concern is the underlying reason for what's driving current population growth; fewer people are dying young. Global life expectancy in 1950 was 49.1 years, this improved to 72.8 years in 2019 – with an increase of nine years strictly between 1990 and 2019. It is expected to increase to 77.2 years by 2050. Thus, most developed countries are going through a HUGE demographic transition.

**In 1960**, there were five active workers for every retired and disabled worker in the United States. The ratio slipped below three to one in 2009 and is headed toward two to one by 2030, according to the Social Security Administration. As this trend continues to deteriorate the pressure on the paychecks of the younger generation will be more and more devoted to maintaining safety nets for the elderly. Centuries of improved quality of life for succeeding generations will grind to a halt.

**A few weeks** ago I lamented that, in my opinion, much of society's problems today stem from a dissolution of societal and personal infrastructure. The wholesale abandonment of religion inevitably leads to a breakdown of communal and family structures as well. To put it plainly, the younger generation, armed with a less than healthy value system, begins to solely focus on themselves in a very selfish way.

In 2020, a team of economists from Wellesley College and the University of Maryland were trying to understand why birth rates continued to fall even after the economy was recovering from the Great Recession of 2007. Those economists concluded that one of the biggest factors was shifting priorities among younger Americans – namely, away from raising children and toward career and travel aspirations.

It probably comes as no surprise to you that the more religious a family is the more likely they are to have a lot of children. Every major religion puts a high priority on fostering a close family and having children. In Israel, one of the only developed countries to buck the trend of falling birth rates, the growth in the Jewish population is primarily due to the average Orthodox family having an average of 6.6 children. Muslims there have similar birth rates. This is not the same as Nick Canon or Elon Musk fathering many children (10 each, Canon soon to be 12); religious families (of all religions) tend to have a close-knit and healthy family structure.

Of course, seeing as the Torah is the basis for many of the world's biggest religions, it is only natural to find that this tendency towards building family is very prominent in the Torah. In this week's Torah reading, some sixty-seven verses are dedicated to the story of Abraham asking his servant Eliezer to find a wife for his son Isaac and the ensuing details of what happened.

Next, we find eleven verses relating to Abraham taking another wife (after Sarah died) and having more children and grandchildren before passing away at the age of 175. The Torah then spends several more verses discussing the families of Abraham's son Ishmael – his wives and children.

There is another, perhaps more practical, reason for the success of religious families building continuous generations of families. As anyone who has seen *Fiddler on the Roof* knows, matchmakers are a significant part of the process. But proposing possible candidates in religious families is far simpler because there is already an 80% commonality in the life goals of potential couples.

For the most part, they already know what their home life will look like, how they want to raise their children, and where they'll send their children to school. There is a mutual understanding of personal and communal responsibility and where they hope to fit in and contribute to both their family and communal life. The innate structures of their future lives are already mostly aligned.

Of course the other 20% – chemistry, compatibility, and attraction – are very important as well and that is where the matchmaker's "magic" comes into play. But most of the relationship variables are already set and, in general, this naturally leads to happier marriages and stronger families. It is this alignment in family values that fosters a deep and lasting emotional bond.

This is why in this week's Torah portion Abraham asked his servant Eliezer to seek a wife from Abraham's homeland and made him promise that he would not find a wife for Isaac from the local Canaanites. Eliezer himself was a very wise man and knowing that the primary ethical value in Abraham's home was the principal of doing kindness for others, he prayed to God and devised the following test for potential mates for Isaac: "When a girl comes out to draw water, I will say to her, 'Let me drink some water from your jug.' If she answers, 'Not only may you drink, but I will also draw water for your camels' then she is the one for my master's son." (Genesis 23:43-44)

Eliezer returned home with Rebecca – the young girl who passed this test – and, according to the sages, Rebecca and Isaac were married for over 100 years!

**TORAH PORTION:** Chayei Sarah, Genesis 23:1 - 25:18

**Sarah** dies at the age of 127. Abraham purchases a burial place for her in Hebron in the cave of Ma'arat HaMachpela. Abraham sends his servant, Eliezer, back to the "old country," his birthplace Charan, to find a wife for Isaac (Yitzchak). Eliezer makes what appear to be very strange conditions for the matrimonial candidate to fulfill in order to qualify for Isaac. Rebecca (Rivka) unknowingly meets the conditions. Eliezer succeeds in getting familial approval, though they were not too keen about Rebecca leaving her native land.

Abraham marries Keturah and fathers six more sons. He sends them east (with the secrets of mysticism) before he dies at 175. Isaac and Ishmael bury Abraham near Sarah in Ma'arat HaMachpela, the cave Abraham purchased to bury Sarah. The portion ends with the listing of Ishmael's 12 sons and Ishmael dying at age 137.

**SHABBAT LIGHTING:** *Jerusalem* 4:03 Miami 5:12 Cape Town 7:12 Guatemala 5:11 Hong Kong 5:22 Honolulu 5:30

**🕯️** Jo'Burg 6:18 LA 4:29 London 3:52 Melbourne 7:54 Mexico 5:39 Moscow 4:00 New York 4:17 Singapore 6:33 Toronto 4:31

**"QUOTE OF THE WEEK":** The secret to a happy marriage remains a secret! — Henny Youngman

Dedicated with Deep Appreciation to  
**George Feldenkreis**



Shabbat Shalom,

*Yitzchak Zweig*

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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