

Women's League for Conservative Judaism

Mishpachah: The Modern Jewish Family

**INFERTILITY, SURROGACY
AND ADOPTION**

Unlocking the Womb: Texts and Prayers for Fertility

In her book *Motherprayer*,* feminist Bible scholar Tikva Frymer Kensky provides ancient texts as spiritual readings for women to use throughout all stages of motherhood – from menstruation through labor and birth.

She presents texts that invoke the key, an important symbol for women in ancient and medieval times. The key was interpreted, metaphorically, as a means to open or unlock the womb. One such text she cites is from the Talmud:

Rabbi Yohanan said: 'Three keys were not entrusted to an agent, and they are: a birthing woman, rain, and the resurrection of the dead.' For a birthing woman: 'And god listened to her and opened her womb' (Gen. 30:22); of rain: 'the LORD will open for you His good treasure, the heaven, to give the rain of your land in its season' (Deut.28:12) ; of resurrection: 'and you will know that I am the LORD when I open your graves (Ezekiel 37:13). In the west they speak of the key of sustenance, 'for you open your and willingly satisfy all living beings'. (Ps. 145:16) *Ta'anit 2a*



In this passage, the rabbinic idea of agency is confirmed -- certain aspects of nature are solely in God's hands, to which God holds the metaphorical key: conception, rain and the resurrection of the dead.

Elsewhere, the image of a key in the hand of God was a common motif in women's amulets, either to aid in getting pregnant (to unlock the womb) or to wear during pregnancy (to ensure a healthy delivery). In medieval Europe, during labor and childbirth, women held in their hands keys of synagogues and churches, believing in the protective potential and power of these objects.

A Prayer for Fertility

This prayer, from the *Kitsur Shelah*,** was recited by those seeking to conceive, invoking God's commandment to 'be fruitful and multiply.' To the petitioner, if God so commands fertility, then God must make it possible.

You are the LORD Our God.
You were our God before You created the world
and You are our God from the time You created the
world and for eternity You are God.
You have created Your world so that Your divinity will be known in it
through the means of Your holy Torah.

O LORD our God, You wrote two commands in Your Torah:
'Be fruitful and multiply'
and you wrote in Your Torah
'...you shall teach this to your children'
and the meaning of both is the same:
for You have not created the world as a wilderness,
but for inhabiting,
and for Your glory you have created, formed and made it,
so that we and our offspring
and the offspring of all Your people Israel
all of us should know Your name and learn Your Torah.

And so I come to You, O LORD King of king of kings,
and I cast my petition before You
and my eyes depend on You
that You should be gracious to me and hear my plea
to bring for me sons and daughters
and they too should be fruitful and multiply,
they and their children and their children's children
till the end of all the generations,
For the Purpose that we all will be busy with Your holy Torah
to study and to teach and to guard and to perform it....

A Tekhine for Conception

This *tekhine*, a prayer in Yiddish from Eastern Europe, written by or for women, was recited by a woman during her time at the mikveh.***

O Great God!

Through water you have made great miracles many times:

The righteous Noah was saved from the flood water.

Our teacher Moses was drawn forth out of water.

The well of Miriam went with Israel through the desert bringing water.

Show today also your miracle that I should be helped through this water to have a child,

one who will be completely righteous,

who will study Torah day and night,

who will light my path—after many days—straight to Heaven.

May I, through his merit, be worthy

to sit with the matriarchs in the women's section of the world to come.

Amen

**Motherprayer: The Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion*, by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Riverhead, 1995 (pp. 14-15)

**The *Kitzur Shelah* by Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein was first published in Fürth in 1683. It was used for many years by people in smaller communities as a guide for what to do at different times of the year.

****Motherprayer*, pp. 12-13