

Birth Control

Do you believe it is wrong for Messianic Believers to practice birth control?

Among some sectors of Messianic Believers are those who believe that it is Biblical for a husband and wife to have large families, beyond the average family size of 3-4 children. Scriptural support that is frequently given for this may include God's command to Adam and Eve to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28, NASU). While the Scriptures do encourage human beings to be fruitful, and for married couples to procreate, do they encourage procreation beyond one's means? Many of those who have large families beyond the average size look down upon those who only have 3-4 children. Do the Scriptures prohibit any kind of birth control or family planning? (And, what about those married couples who have no children—or for that matter the single men and women in our faith community?)

This has certainly been a debated issue for many centuries, and is not limited to the Messianic movement by any means. The official dogma of Roman Catholicism, for example, prohibits any form of birth control. Liberal Christians and Jews, in stark contrast, believe that any form of birth control, *including abortion*, is acceptable. Many Conservative and Reform Jews, and evangelical Protestants, take a middle position on birth control, advocating that some forms of it are acceptable, while other forms are unacceptable. Aside from a belief that abortion is unacceptable, the Messianic world has those who favor forms of birth control, every bit as much as it has those who disfavor forms of birth control.

Those against birth control, in addition to arguing against it on the basis that God expects human beings to be fruitful, may argue against it from Genesis 38:8-10:

"Then Judah said to Onan, 'Go in to your brother's wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.' Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother. But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD; so He took his life also" (NASU).

Those against any form of birth control will often make serious light of the fact that Onan "spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring" (NIV) and was killed by the hand of God for it. However, the context of this happening is very important so we do not make the automatic assumption that all forms of birth control are wrong. According to Deuteronomy 25:5, "When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be *married* outside *the family* to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her" (NASU). Nahum M. Sarna informs us, "This institution is known in Hebrew as *yibbum*. In English it is called 'levirate marriage' (from Latin *levir*, 'a husband's brother')."¹

In early Biblical times, because marriages were property contracts every bit as much as individual bonds, for a woman not to produce an heir meant that the inheritance a deceased husband left would have to be divided, possibly weakening the family. Onan agreed to impregnate his sister-in-law in accordance with the custom of levirate marriage at the command of Judah. If he had not done this, then the portion of property he would have inherited from his brother would have been considerably more than if Tamar had not gotten pregnant and had given birth to a son. Onan begins the sexual act with Tamar, but withdraws at the last minute. God struck him down for not performing the proper act that he agreed to do.

We have to consider the fact that this was an isolated incident, and is not a blanket event condemning all birth control for all generations to come. Further instruction in Deuteronomy allows for a voluntary renunciation of the practice of levirate marriage:

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, "Genesis," in David L. Lieber, *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), 234.

“But if the man does not desire to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, ‘My husband's brother refuses to establish a name for his brother in Israel; he is not willing to perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.’ Then the elders of his city shall summon him and speak to him. And *if* he persists and says, ‘I do not desire to take her,’ then his brother's wife shall come to him in the sight of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face; and she shall declare, ‘Thus it is done to the man who does not build up his brother's house’” (Deuteronomy 25:7-9, NASU).

Onan did not tell Judah that he would renounce Tamar, but instead agrees to go through with the sexual act. However, instead of performing the act of the levirate, Onan withdraws at the point of climax, ejaculating on the ground. It was for not performing his duty through to the end that Onan was killed—not that he withdrew.

EJ largely summarizes the viewpoints of the Orthodox Jewish community today, which is largely against birth control:

“It is in the rabbinic responsa, especially those of the past 200 years, that the attitude of Jewish law to birth control is defined and discussed in great detail. The many hundreds of rulings recorded in these responsa consider urgent medical reasons as the only valid justification for certain contraceptive precautions. Jewish law regards such decisions as capital judgments and it would, therefore, insist on dealing with each case on its individual merits and on the evidence of competent medical opinion. Where some grave hazard to the mother, however remote, is feared, as a result of pregnancy, the rabbinic attitude is usually quite liberal, all the more readily if the commandment of procreation (which technically requires having a son and a daughter) has already been fulfilled. Under no circumstances, however, does Jewish law sanction any contraceptive acts or safeguards on the part of the male, nor does it ever tolerate the use or distribution of birth control devices outside marriage.”²

The key to note here is that while Orthodox Judaism is largely against the practice of a couple not having any children, **“Jewish law regards such decisions as capital judgments and it would, therefore, insist on dealing with each case on its individual merits and on the evidence of competent medical opinion.”** While dealing with each couple on a case-by-case basis, the Jewish community as a whole, including Conservative and Reform Judaism, has largely liberalized its stand on birth control due to the population explosion of the last century. “In common with the attitude of most Protestant denominations, Reform Judaism would generally leave the decision on birth control to the individual conscience, recognizing social and economic factors no less than the medical motivation” (*EJ*).³

It is important to note, according to Sarna, that on the whole “Jewish law permits various forms of contraception for medical and other reasons but prefers methods that do not destroy the generative seed,”⁴ although there are certainly various opinions among the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform communities. Accepted forms of birth control that would be used today among the Conservative and Reform Jewish communities include the usage of vaginal sponges, the diaphragm, condoms, and the birth control pill. Preferred forms are those used by the woman that prevent the union of egg and sperm. In some cases withdrawal is permitted. Spermicide, because it kills sperm, is largely not permitted. There is also debate over forms of birth control that one has definite control over, such as the sponge, diaphragm, or condom, and those that alter the chemical and hormonal balance of a woman such as the pill. Likewise, vasectomy on a male is considered an unacceptable form of birth control, as is tubal ligation on a woman, except in extreme medical cases.

The issue of birth control is not frequently debated in the evangelical Protestant community. Not all evangelicals are in favor of birth control, even though some favor forms of it. Beliefs vary among denominations, although most conservative denominations encourage married couples to have children, but not at the expense of their own marriage. In other words, children are encouraged to come forth out of a love that a husband and wife have toward one another, not because they should feel obligated to have children and simply procreate for the sake of procreating.

The primary debate among Protestants often regards the morality of abortion, with many being against it *in any form*. While abortion-on-demand is an ungodly and horrific procedure, moderates on the issue do concede that there are exceptions. When a woman's life is in danger, abortion may be necessary. Likewise, a pregnancy

² Immanuel Jakobovits, “Birth Control,” in *EJ*.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Sarna, in *Etz Hayim*, 34.

involving gross psychological trauma, such as rape or incest, may require an abortion. These issues, of course, must be considered on a case-by-case basis and must involve the pregnant woman consulting her husband or parents, as well as a pastor and/or doctor. This is consistent with much of the Jewish community, which also recognizes that there can be exceptions regarding abortion.

On the whole, our ministry adheres to the basic views of Conservative and Reform Judaism, as well as evangelical Protestantism, when it comes to birth control. **We do not believe that all forms of birth control are prohibited by the Scriptures**, but we certainly encourage married couples to have children as a result of their love. However, a couple with children needs to be able to have them within their means. For some, having multiple children all at once can be a great physical and psychological strain—not to mention a financial burden. In Biblical times, having large families was every bit as much of an economic decision as it was procreative. One needed many children to perform household and agricultural tasks. Today, in strong contrast, having smaller families is often an economic decision.

The decision how to have children ultimately involves a husband and wife and what they prayerfully decide between themselves and the Lord. It is not anyone's place to judge a couple for not having more than the average 3-4 children, any more than it is anyone's place to judge a couple for not being able to have children, or even to judge an unmarried man or woman who cannot find the proper spouse. This issue is one where a couple has to decide for themselves, based on what they read in Scripture, whether or not their marriage relationship is mature enough to allow for children, and the cultural and economic considerations that must be made. More than anything else, this is something that couples should not have outsiders unnecessarily interfering with.