

THE BIBLICAL-TALMUDIC SECRET FOR

CHOOSING ONE'S BABY'S SEX*

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The American public was startled with the publication in 1970 of a book entitled "Your Baby's Sex: Now You Can Choose". Gynecologist Shettles, author of the book, claims that X and Y spermatozoa can be identified by their different sizes and shapes. The larger, oval-shaped, female-producing sperm are resistant to an acid environment, whereas the smaller, round-headed but more numerous male-producing sperm succumb in an acid environment. Thus, to insure a female offspring, Shettles recommends a variety of technics to increase the acidity of the cervical and vaginal secretions. If a boy is desired, procedures are described which increase alkalinity in the female lower genital tract.

Shettles may have provided twentieth century man with a possible solution to the age-old desire of choosing the sex of his offspring. However, the secret of determining one's baby's sex was already known to the Sages of the Talmud, thus fulfilling the claim of King Solomon that **There is nothing new under the sun** (Eccles. 1:9).

The key passage is found in the fifth century Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Niddah 31a).

Rabbi Isaac citing Rabbi Ammi stated: If the woman emits her semen first she bears a male child; if the man emits his semen first she bears a female child; for it is said **If a woman emits semen and bear a man-child** [Levit. 12:2]. Our Rabbis taught: At first it used to be said that if the woman emits her semen first she will bear a male, and if the man emits his semen first she will bear a female, but the Sages did not explain the reason, until Rabbi Zadok came and explained it: **These are the sons of Leah, whom she bore unto Jacob in Paddan-Aram with his daughter Dinah** [Gen. 46:15]. Scripture thus ascribes the males to the females [i.e.,

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sons of Leah] and the females to the males [i.e., his daughter Dinah].

And the sons of Ulam were mighty men of valor, archers: and had many sons, and son' sons [I Chron. 8:40]. Now is it within the power of man to increase the number of **sons and sons' sons**? But the fact is that because they contained themselves during intercourse, in order that their children shall be males, Scripture attributes to them the same merit as if they had themselves caused the increase of the number of their sons and sons' sons. This explains what Rabbi Kattina said 'I could make all my children to be males'.

Although **many sons and sons' sons** could refer to offspring in general, that is male and female, Maharsha, in his commentary on the above Talmudic passage, explains that the phrase **men of valor and archers** indicates they were all males. The Talmud seems to be referring to orgasm and recommends that a woman reach orgasm first if a male offspring is desired.

The above Talmudic passage continues with a statement by Raba that "one who desires all his children to be males should cohabit twice in succession". Rashi, explains that during the second intercourse, the woman will certainly "emit seed first". Apparently, the post-coital refractory period in the man was already recognized by Rashi who therefore concludes that a male offspring will result since the woman reached orgasm first.

Two places in the Talmud (Tractate Niddah 25b and 28a) raise the question of what happens if both man and woman emit seed simultaneously. Several possible answers are given: the offspring may be a hermaphrodite (androgynos), or one whose sex is unknown (tumtum), or twins, one male and one female.

Elsewhere (Tractate Gittin 57a), the Talmud describes a "Village of males" (**Kfar Dikraya**), so called because women used to bear male children first, and finally a girl, and then no more.

Another Talmudic passage (Tractate Berachoth 54a) states that if a man's wife is pregnant and he supplicates that G-d grant that his wife bear a male child, this is a vain prayer. The Talmud then asks (*ibid* 60a):

Does such a prayer avail? Has not Rabbi Isaac, the

son of Rabbi Ammi said that if a man first emits seed, the child will be a girl; if the woman first emits seed, the child will be a boy? [which shows that it is all fixed beforehand]. With what case are we dealing here? For instance, they both emitted seed at the same time. [Apparently in such a situation, prayer would help issue a male offspring].

A final Talmudic passage (Niddah 70b-71a) concerns one of 12 questions that the Alexandrians addressed to Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah which was the following:

What must a man do that he may have male children? He replied: He shall marry a wife that is worthy of him, and conduct himself in modesty at the time of marital intercourse. They said to him: Did not many act in this manner but it did not avail them? Rather, let him pray for mercy from Him to whom are the children, for it is said [Psalms 124:3]: **Lo, children are a heritage of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward.** [Seeing that one has in any case to pray for mercy], what then does he teach us? That one without the other does not suffice. What is exactly meant by **the fruit of the womb is a reward**? Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Haninah, replied: As a reward for containing oneself during intercourse in the womb, in order that one's wife may emit the semen first, the Holy One, blessed be He, gives one the reward of the fruit of the womb.

How can we in the twentieth century understand what the Talmud meant 1500 years ago? How are we to interpret "if a woman emits seed"? Does it refer to ovulation? If so, then Shettles' hypothesis (1-2) may in fact explain the entire Talmudic discussion in that ovulation represents a time when cervical secretions are alkaline allowing the male-producing sperm to predominate. Does

- 1) Shettles, L.B.: Nuclear Morphology of Human Spermatozoa. *Nature* **186**: 648-649, 1960
- 2) Shettles, L.B.: The Great Preponderance of Human Males Conceived. *Amer. J. Obst. Gynec.* **89**: 130-133, 1964

this phrase "if a woman emits seed" refer to female orgasm? We know that orgasm increases the flow of alkaline secretions which would also enhance the activity of the male-producing sperm. It would seem obvious from a number of the previous citations that the meaning must be orgasm rather than ovulation, for otherwise it would not make sense to speak of the men restraining themselves during intercourse in order to allow their wives to "emit seed" first.

Let us turn to the Biblical commentaries for assistance in the interpretation of the key phrase . . . **if a woman emits seed** (Hebrew: **Tazria**) **and gives birth to a male child** (Levit 12:2) upon which is based the Talmudic pronouncement regarding sex determination. Twelfth century Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra asserts as follows:

. . . Many say that if the woman emits her seed first she bears a male child . . . the view of the Greek savants is that the woman has the seed and the male seed causes it to jell and the entire son comes from the blood of the woman. Actually, the explanation of the word **Tazria** is to give forth seed, because she is like the earth.

The latter phrase "she is like earth" is explained by a later Biblical commentary (**Siftei Chakhamim**) in that "a woman is like earth which sprouts that which one plants therein, and man was created from earth". Twentieth century Rabbi Meir ben Yechiel Michael, known as **Malbim**, echoes the same sentiment: "The fetus comes out from the site of semen implantation like the earth, which sprouts that which is planted. . ."

Thirteenth century Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, **Ramban**, in his commentary on the pertinent quote in Leviticus, states as follows:

. . . When the Sages interpreted the phrase **if a woman conceives** to mean that if a woman emits her seed first she bears a male child [Niddah 31a], their intention was not to imply that the fetus is formed from the seed of the woman. For even though the woman has eggs (i.e., ovaries) like the eggs of a male (i.e., testicles), either she creates no seed in them at all, or that seed jells and contributes nothing to the fetus.

The Sages' saying that **she conceives** refers to the blood of the uterus which gathers in the mother at the end of intercourse and unites with the male seed because, in their view, the fetus is formed from the blood of the female and white [semen] of the man, and both are called seed. Similarly did they state [ibid]: Man has 3 partners [in his creation]: the father supplies white [semen] from which are formed sinews, bones and the white of the eye; the mother provides the red [semen] from which are formed skin, flesh, blood and hair and the black of the eye [and G-d gives the spirit and the breath, beauty of features, eyesight, the power of hearing, the ability to speak and to walk, understanding and discernment]. And this is also the view of [human] creation of physicians. And, according to the Greek philosophers, the entire body of the fetus comes from the blood of the mother. The father only has the power known as **heyuli** in their language: that is, he gives form to the matter ... so too renders **Targum Onkelos** "she carries seed".

Ramban is saying several things. Firstly, a fetus or embryo is initiated from uterine blood which is called seed. Secondly, the ovaries are considered either not to contain seed or the seed therein is useless. Contrary to Ibn Ezra and the ancient Greeks, who are of the opinion that the entire baby comes from the mother's blood, Ramban asserts that the baby is produced from the contributions of both the mother's uterine blood and the father's seed.

Sixteenth century Rabbi Obadiah Seforno interprets the phrase in Leviticus as follows:

The Sages have already stated [Tractate Niddah 31a] that if a woman emits seed first she bears a male child, because in fact it is the seed of the woman. And it is the liquid that emanates from her at times during intercourse which plays no role at all in the formation of the male fetus; rather her uterine blood jells in the seed of the father. When some of her liquid seed enters her jelled blood, then liquid seed is in excess, and the offspring is a girl.

Seforno seems to be saying that ovarian seed is useless for the production of male offspring but does play a role in the formation of girls. In either case, the essential reproductive force is the woman's uterine blood.

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aharon, in his Biblical commentary known as **Keli Yakar**, simply states that the explanation of the Rabbinic dictum that if a man emits seed first, the offspring is a male and vice versa is that "this is a matter of nature".

A very novel approach is found in the commentary of **Da'at Zekenim Mi-Baale HaTosafot** as follows:

There are seven openings in a woman, three on the right, three on the left and one in the middle. If the seed enters on the right side, a male offspring is born; if on the left side a female offspring is born; but if in the middle, a **tumtum** (baby of unknown sex) or **androgynos** (hermaphrodite) is born. If she lies on her right side, the seed will enter the openings on the right and she will give birth to a boy ... and if she lies on the left side, she will give birth to a girl ...

The above opinion seems to be based upon Hippocrates who in his famous **Aphorisms** (section 5:48) said that a male fetus matures better on the right side and a female fetus on the left side. Earlier (*ibid.* 5:38), Hippocrates said that if a woman is pregnant with twins and one of her breasts shrinks, one of her fetuses will be aborted. If the right breast shrinks, the male fetus is aborted; if the left breast shrinks, the female fetus is aborted. The fabel of "the male is on the right side" was already cited by Anaxagoras (see Aristotle's **De Generatione** 4:9). The advice of Galen, in his commentary on the **Book of Epidemics** (section 7, chapter 4:27) is as follows: "He who wishes to give birth to a boy should squeeze on his right testicle during intercourse". This custom is still in usage in Eastern India to this day; however, it is the woman who squeezes on her husband's right testicle. By contrast, the Jews have no such belief. Rambam in his commentary on the Aphorisms of Hippocrates (3), is very critical of the latter

3) Rosner, F. (translator & editor): Moses Maimonides' Commentary on the Aphorisms of Hippocrates. Submitted for publication.

for saying that a male fetus matures better on the right side and a female fetus on the left side. Rambam says that one should be either prophet or genius to know this.

The difficulty in properly understanding the key phrase in Leviticus "and if a woman emits seed and gives birth to a male" continued among Biblical commentators even down to the present century. Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein, in his very recent commentary entitled **Torah Temimah** offers the following observation on the predetermination of sex by the one who emits seed first:

It seems clear that the matter was known to the Sages because this is the way it is in nature, because all is reckoned after the first power. Therefore, if the man emits semen first, his strength is finished first and the creation is determined by the last power, which is her seed, and therefore she bears a female child. And so too the reverse. There is only an allusion or hint of this fact in this Scriptural phrase ... for this well-known occurrence in nature.

The entire concept can be interpreted ethically, that is, as an encouragement to men to practice restraint during intercourse and allow their wives to come to orgasm, holding out the promise of male issue as a reward (4).

Man continues to be puzzled by the enigma of choosing one's baby's sex prior to sexual intercourse. The Talmud emphatically states that if a woman emits her semen first, she will bear a male and if the man emits his semen first, she will bear a female. Although orgasm seems to be the most likely explanation, we have yet to precisely understand what the Talmud means. The secret of sex predetermination remains hidden.

4) Rackman, E.: Health & Holiness. Tradition (Rabbinical Council of America) 2: 67-81, 1959