

The Task of Deciding
By Hila Amit

As a young girl in Israel, you are surrounded by children. They are everywhere. You notice them, you respond to them, you are meant to attend to them. They are there as a part of the childhood you had and the future you will have. They are physically there, wherever you go: as siblings, cousins; the yelling of the children behind you in the line to the cashier; the babies you had to visit with your mum; the circumcision party you just attended. As a teenager they keep haunting every aspect of your life: the children you babysit to earn a few shekels for going out on the weekends; the children you counsel in the scouts; the summer camp job you scored in high school that paid for your trip to Europe after graduation; the babies your older cousins are starting to have.

Children are not just physically there, but children exist also in another sphere, a mental sphere. There are children who are not yet there but still have a presence in your thoughts: the nieces and nephews you will have. The children *you* will have.

When I was in the third grade, we had a school trip to Jerusalem. We were taken, amongst other places in the capital, to the Wailing Wall. We did not know what the concept of God was, but we were told we should put little slips of paper containing our prayers to God into the crevices of the wall. Maybe because I never did this again as an adult, I still remember what I wrote on that note: "Please God, I want to marry Gil (the coolest boy in my class) and have three beautiful children". I did not ask God to become an astronaut, a famous movie star, a ballerina. I aspired to have three children. This was my dream, my most secret desire. My one and only wish from God. I was nine years old.

As girls, children were what we wished for. As women, children are what determines our career choices. Everything one does in their life in Israel is in preparation for *when* one has children. There is a grace period of *before* having children. This period includes high school, the army service, and the months-long trip Israelis do after the army and before university. This grace period is reserved only for the secular Jews, of course. The religious ones get married at 18 and start having babies then.

When you reach the point of choosing what you want to study in university, you are encouraged to think well, because you need a real profession, one in which you will earn money. Money not for traveling, seeing the world, personal development. No. Money to take care of the children you will have. Three kids require a 4-bedroom apartment. Rents are high. Buying is impossible. Diapers cost a fortune. Not to mention all the other stuff you will need.

Three children in Israel are the norm. Some wealthy secular Jews are having four children nowadays. It's a status symbol. The proof you can do it all. Be a career woman and a mum.

My story is a bit different: I have made so many mistakes on the way. I did not follow the path at all. On that third-grade trip to Jerusalem I was probably the closest I ever was to being on the "right" path. From then onwards, it was plain downhill. By the time I was 18, I somehow, by the course of pure luck, managed to develop some sort of a political conscious, which led me to avoid the army service. As it is not only mandatory but also one of the most important social institutions in Israel, I was already starting off my life as an adult on the "wrong" foot.

It did not help that at 19 I came out to my parents. Coming out mainly meant for my parents no grandchildren from me. It was the early 2000s. In a way, it was also clear to me that I will most likely not have children. While there was a kicking queer community (which I was about to discover a few years later), queer parents did not exist yet in the public sphere.

Being an average family in Israel (3.09 births per woman) my parents still had the chance to be grandparents. I have an older brother and a younger sister. They did not take the coming out very well, but at

least they were not devastated. I had a few years of being the queer one out, the daughter that no one had any expectations for. But that grace period did not last for long.

The cult of children in Israel is so great that queers were becoming parents as well. Not only were they having children, but their struggle to have children became one of the key fights in improving LGBT rights—much more than the right to get married (which is still not possible for gay couples). Just recently, in the summer of 2021, surrogacy in Israel finally became legal for gay men. Lesbian couples (and single women) were always allowed to get funded fertility treatment, including as many IVF cycles as they wished. Long legal struggles have made it possible for the non-biological mother to adopt her partner's child, but lesbian couples still face a lot of difficult bureaucracy and are still in a disadvantaged position in comparison with heterosexual couples.

My parents were quick to get on the “queers can have babies too” train. A few years ago, my dad, who was still grandchildren free, had bought a new coffee cup which he used every time I came to visit them in my hometown. The cup said, in giant black letters, “world's greatest grandpa”. My dad would drink his black coffee, the caption facing me, hoping that I will notice and respond. I ignored the efforts. He then moved to talking about the matter directly. On these repeating occasions I had to inform him with the harsh truth: I do not want to have children. He would then ask me, why not?

It is a very difficult task trying to explain to your Israeli parents why you don't want to have children. The task becomes even more challenging when you are a woman aged 35 or more with a ticking biological clock. Men enjoy the benefit of being able to impregnate a woman younger than themselves, so the pressure is reduced. This also works for gay men: most of my gay friends have had their children in the mid 40s. I know a couple who had their baby girl in their early 50s. But they all had children, no matter how old and how queer they were.

I do not have a single friend who feels the same. It is worse than coming out. I have no one to contemplate the decision with. There are no public figures in Israeli culture who did not have children. The topic is rarely even discussed. One academic, Ornah Donath, wrote 2 books on the topic, but if I had not done a Masters in Gender Studies I probably would have not even known about these books. In her first book Donath interviewed women who decided not to have children. I read it with an eagerness I do not remember I have ever experienced. Finally, someone was talking about what I wanted to talk about. None of her interviewees agreed to expose their name or identity. It is such an explosive topic.

Most of my female friends in Israel are mothers now, the heterosexuals and lesbians alike. Most of my gay and trans FTM friends are also fathers/parents. My best friend is currently going through an IVF process. Though I know our friendship will be so much closer if she does not have a child, I cross my fingers for her every time there is another cycle of hormones and insemination. I know how miserable she will be if she fails.

This feeling of being miserable if one fails to be a parent is exactly the feeling I lack. A feeling I sometimes actually wish I had. What disturbs me the most is that I am surrounded by this culture, the baby cult of Israel, and yet, I do not want a baby. It is as if years of indoctrination have somehow skipped my innocent brain. I look at my mother friends, how they tend to their children, how they nurse their sons and daughters. I hold their babies, look at their sweet smiles, hold their tiny hands, push them back and forth on the swing. I sit with them on the floor, surrounded with toys, and I make them laugh and giggle and I am craving for that feeling all my friends have: the feeling of wanting that for myself. This kind of love.

My mother was always a very miserable woman. Growing up, we had to come to terms with the fact that she was probably very miserable because of us. I do not remember my mother tending to us the way I see my mother-friends today. I was a child, so of course it is possible that in the narrative I build around my childhood, I chose to remember only the terrible parts. It is possible that she had enjoyed her time with us. It

is possible that we had shared that kind of love. Sadly, all I can remember is exactly the opposite. The three of us were a burden to her. I sometimes thought, as a child, that she hated me. And I am sure I thought I hated her.

My parents are still married. My mother was not a single mother, but she did bear the main load of care giving. She worked as a teacher, was home at 13:00 to welcome us back from school or kindergarten and serve us a home cooked meal for lunch. Afterwards she would go to take a nap and we were supposed to be silent. We had only one TV at the time, no cable TV, just one public channel, no computers, no phone. And we did not get along well with each other. So, we fought, my siblings and me. We always made a mess; we always made a lot of noise. During the noise, she would wake up, chase us to our rooms, and threaten to punish us if we do not shut up. There was also physical violence. It was the 80s, parenting was different back then. They also left us with babysitters we barely knew, and they even went on a two-week trip to Europe when my sister was one year old. I do not know parents who would do that today, but I guess in Israel in the 80s and early 90s, this was common. When I got a bit older, around fourth grade, I stopped coming home after school. I would go visit my friend, go to sleepovers on the weekend, avoided home as much as I could.

When I tell this to my father, or friends, or my therapist, they all say that the same does not need to happen to me: I will not be like my mother. Especially because I know what it meant to not be loved. But I cannot shake off the fear. Fine, maybe I will not chase my kids to the rooms, will not yell at them to be quiet, slap them if they don't. But will I feel that love? What if I will be miserable?

"You won't ever regret it", they say. My mother-friends. They look at their smartphones when they talk to me. We are in a café, one hour away from their kids, and still they browse through pictures of their children as if they have not seen them in a year, their heart melting in front of me.

I want to feel that: the heart-melting-feeling. I want to be an obnoxious parent who cannot stop talking about their children. I wish there was a test one could take, *How You Will Be As a Parent*.

I have been struggling with depression since I was a teenager. I have been on and off medications for ten years, seen numerous therapists. A few years ago, I had a talk about children with my friend Ofer, a gay man who had two children in his late 40s. We were sitting in a café in Europe, far away from his kids and partner, and I asked him to tell me, really, how it is like. For some reason, I always feel that for gay men it is easier to speak about the hardships of parenthood than for the straight women. Ofer looked at me as he was sipping his cappuccino, admiring the ability to have a cup of coffee in the afternoon without being disturbed by a child who is asking for attention. He said something that I will probably never forget. The level of happiness skyrockets, he said, side to side with the level of miserableness. It is happiness you have never experienced before, he said. But it is also levels of distress you have never experienced before. That conversation did not help me reach a decision. It pushed me deeper into the decision-making-abys.

I know that life is all about taking the good with the bad. I can handle that. But how does one decide to take the great with the horrible?

For many years I was searching for the push, something inside of me that will convince me that the moments of great happiness are worth the moments of great distress. Hey, everybody else is doing it, it cannot possibly be the wrong choice. They are also doing it again and again! Why would anyone have a second and third kid if it's unbearable? There must be something to it. The happiness must be so good that they can all deal with the misery.

Being depressed is also a difficult feeling to describe to those who were never depressed. Any mental illness, really. My mother was never diagnosed of anything. In fact, she refused to go see a therapist, refused to see a couple therapist. I went to see a therapist when I was 19 and trying to come to terms with the coming out and the not going to the army. My mother did not want to pay for it, and my father secretly gave me money to pay for my therapy. I think that she suffered from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. I

think we, my siblings and I, would have benefited if she had seen a therapist back in the day. However, the fact that I can see a therapist, take pills, take care of my mental health, does not make me feel like I would be able to manage what comes with pregnancy and with raising a kid. I have the benefit of letting my partner carry the child. But I worry so much about our relationship not surviving the stress a baby brings.

At some point, I left Israel. I moved to the European spheres where not every woman has a child and most families do not have three children. I see children around me in Berlin, too. But In Berlin, at least from my personal view, these children can be avoided. One does not have to see them everywhere. I can stay in my queer bubble and not see children. The main perk of Berlin in comparison to Israel is that no one asks you about *when* you will have children. No one expects you to have a child. Unlike Israel, it is not the most important decision you will make in your life. It is also a very personal decision. No one here will ask you what is going on. Your parents will not sip coffee from a cup with a hidden message. I feel more relaxed here, with the decision. Especially as I don't have to spend most of my social life around parents. It is easier to forget here that every year that goes by my ticking biological clock is nearing its end.

I like to think of my books as my children. I sometimes think I should put my book covers as the screen saver on my phone, or as the Facebook cover photo. True, they are not living creatures who give me love. They will not take care of me when I grow old. They bring me joy but also fear and distress with every bad critique get. But this is mental distress I know how to handle. My books cannot act out. They cannot get sick; they cannot hate me. They do not need constant care.

My parents have stopped asking me about it by now. My brother is expecting and they will have the long-awaited grandson soon enough. Most of my mother-friends have stopped pestering me about children and regret. Only occasionally a friend I have not seen in a long time finds it her responsibility to tell me how amazing it is to have children. I am 37. I know there are about 3–4 more years of these kind of conversations. Eventually they will stop. Eventually I won't have to defend my decision anymore. Nature will do its charm. Soon my mother-friends will have three grownup kids and we will be able to resume talking about other things. Maybe. For the moment, I am concentrating on not giving in to the fear of regret, trying to allow myself to trust my instincts. Children are not for me, and that is okay.

“You will regret it,” my mother-friends say. I might indeed regret it. I have no way to negate that statement. But I might also regret having children. Which I think is the story of my mum. And if I need to regret something, I prefer regretting not having a child, rather than brining a little person to the world and then not giving them that love.