

Be Fruitful and Multiply: command or blessing?

By Yochanan Zaquantov

You hear people quote quite often Bereshit/Genesis 1:28 that we are to be Fruitful and Multiply. Some would argue that it was a command from YHWH. Yet, others would argue that it was a blessing. What exactly does it mean to be Fruitful and Multiply? If it is a command then what about all those couples who can never have children?

So today we are going to cover this topic and look specifically as what is written in Tanakh on this and come to a position based upon peshat (Plain Meaning) and logical reasoning.

First lets look at the phrase in Bereshit 1:27-28.

27 And Elohim created man in His image, in the image of Elohim He created him; male and female He created them. 28 **Elohim blessed them (Vay'barekh otam**

וַיְבָרֵךְ אֹתָם) and Elohim said to them, “**Be fertile and increase (Paru ur'bu**

פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ), fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”

In this verse, we see he first blessed the man and woman. In Hebrew it says He blessed them. Some would link this to the rest of the verse and say it shows they were blessed by YHWH and the Be fertile or Fruitful and Multiply or be many. But lets continue.

The phrase we are looking at is Parah rabbah. Parah פרה (6509) and it is a verb and Rabbah רבה (7235) and it is also a verb.

Bereshit/Genesis 1:22 (20-22)

20 Elohim said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky.” 21 Elohim created the great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind. And Elohim saw that this was

good. 22 Elohim **blessed them (vay'barekh otam וַיְבָרֵךְ אֹתָם**), saying, “**Be**

fertile and increase (paru ur'bu פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ), fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.”

Now you can see that this earlier reference was to the fishes and birds alone. Now how can an animal discern between a blessing and a command. It can't at least in our

understanding. However, they do procreate and increase upon the earth. The difference between them and us is that we are able to discern between blessing and command.

You also see that the be fertile and increase is the same in Hebrew as the later command for man and woman. Also, it never references here for the rest of the land animals to be fertile and increase as they were also created on the sixth day.

Bereshit/Genesis 8:17 (15-17)

15 Elohim spoke to Noah, saying, 16 “Come out of the ark, together with your wife, your sons, and your sons’ wives. 17 Bring out with you every living thing of all flesh that is with you: birds, animals, and everything that creeps on earth; and let them swarm on the earth and be fertile and increase on earth (uparu varabu al haaretz

וּפְרוּ וְרָבוּ עַל-הָאָרֶץ.”

After the flood the, YHWH is instructing Noach to allow the animal to roam free and that be fertile and increase on the land. We know that this is not a command to Noach in that he cannot effect the population of the animals.

Bereshit/Genesis 9:1, 7 (1-7)

Elohim **blessed** (vay’barekh וַיְבָרֶךְ) Noah and his sons, and said to them, “**Be fertile**

and increase (Paru ur’bu פְּרוּ וְרָבוּ), and fill the earth. 2 The fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky— everything with which the earth is astir—and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand. 3 Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these. 4 You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it. 5 But for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning: I will require it of every beast; of man, too, will I require a reckoning for human life, of every man for that of his fellow man! 6 Whoever sheds the blood of man, By man shall his blood be shed; For in His

image Did God make man. 7 **Be fertile, then, and increase** (Paru ur’bu פְּרוּ

וְרָבוּ); abound on the earth and increase on it.”

Here we see that the follow up to the animals being allowed to be fertile and increase that Noach and his sons were again blessed and then told to be fertile and increase in verse 1. In verse 2-6, YHWH is telling them that the animals will be afraid of man and that they are now food. He tells them to not to eat the blood with the meat. Lastly, they are told again to be fertile and increase. In Hebrew it is the same usage, however, no blessing if noted here.

Bereshit/Genesis 17:20 (18-20)

18 And Abraham said to Elohim, “O that Ishmael might live by Your favor!”
19 Elohim said, “Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac; and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come. 20 As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. **I hereby bless him**

(berakh'tiy בִּרְכֵיתִי). **I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous (**

vehif'reydiy oto vehir'beydiy וְהִפְרִיתִי אֹתוֹ וְהִרְבֵּיתִי). He shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation.

Here we see the hiphil form of the verb and that in that YHWH is saying this he is stating he will do this making many and fertile.

Bereshit/Genesis 28:3 (1-4)

1 So Isaac sent for Jacob **and blessed him (vay'barekh oto וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתוֹ)**. He instructed him, saying, “You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women.

2 Up, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take a wife there from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother, 3 **May El**

Shaddai bless you (ve'el shaddai yebarekh otkha וְאֵל שַׁדַּי יְבָרֶךְ אֹתְךָ), **make**

you fertile and numerous (veyaf'rekha veyar'bekha וַיַּפְרֶךְ וַיַּרְבֶּךָ), so that you become an assembly of peoples.

Here we see that this is a blessing from Yitzchak to Yaaqov. He also asks El Shaddai to bless his offspring. Thus, in Yitzchak's mind YHWH was the source of the blessing for reproduction.

Bereshit/Genesis 35:11

9 Elohim appeared again to Jacob on his arrival from Paddan-aram, **and He blessed**

him (vay'barekh oto וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתוֹ). 10 Elohim said to him,

“You whose name is Jacob,
You shall be called Jacob no more,
But Israel shall be your name.”
Thus He named him Israel.

11 And Elohim said to him,
“I am El Shaddai.

Be fertile and increase (parah ur'beh פְּרֶה וּרְבֵה);

A nation, yea an assembly of nations,
Shall descend from you.

Kings shall issue from your loins.

12 The land that I assigned to Abraham and Isaac I assign to you; And to your offspring to come Will I assign the land.”

13 Elohim parted from him at the spot where He had spoken to him;

Here we see that YHWH/El Shaddai appears to him and changes his name and blesses him with many offspring. We know this is his offspring since no one man can have enough children to be a nation never mind a assembly of nations.

Bereshit/Genesis 47:27

26 And Joseph made it into a land law in Egypt, which is still valid, that a fifth should be Pharaoh's; only the land of the priests did not become Pharaoh's.

27 Thus Israel settled in the country of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; they acquired holdings in it, **and were fertile and increased greatly (vayif'ru vayir'bu meod**

וַיִּפְרוּ וַיִּרְבוּ מְאֹד).

Here we see that the Israelites were given the area in Egypt and what YHWH said would happen, happened. They were fertile and increased. Thus, because of the Blessing given to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaaqov they increased in people.

Bereshit/Genesis 48:4

3 And Jacob said to Joseph, “El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan,

and He blessed me (vay'barek oto וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶתִּי), 4 and said to me, ‘I will make

you fertile and numerous (mafrekha vehir'biy tikha מַפְרֵכְהָ וְהִרְבִּיתִּיךָ), making

of you a community of peoples; and I will assign this land to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession.’ 5 Now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, shall be mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon. 6 But progeny born to you after them shall be yours; they shall be recorded instead of their brothers in their inheritance. 7 I [do this because], when I was returning from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, while I was journeying in the land of Canaan, when still some distance short of Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath”—now Bethlehem.

Here is the issue. If YHWH commanded all peoples in Bereshit 1 to be fertile and multiply then why does he make the children of Yisrael fertile and multiply as a blessing to them. Either the earlier one was also a blessing or it is a contradiction.

Shemot/Exodus 1:7

5 The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt. 6 Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. 7 **But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly (paru vayish'retzu vayir'bu vayatz'mu bim'od meod**

פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ וַיִּרְבוּ וַיַּעֲצְמוּ בְּמֵאֵד בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד), so that the land was filled with them.

Here we see Parah and Rabbah with Sharatz שרצ (8317), which is another Hebrew word for multiply but in the sense of swarm (many). So they literally spread through the land of Goshen.

Vayiqra/Leviticus 26:9 (3-9)

3 If you follow My laws and faithfully observe **My commandments (mitz'votay**

מִצְוֹתַי), 4 I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit. 5 Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and your vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land.

6 I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the land respite from vicious beasts, and no sword shall cross your land. 7 You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. 8 Five of you shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword.

9 **I will look with favor upon you, and make you fertile and multiply you; and I will maintain My covenant with you.**

It states in Hebrew Im אם or If. Making these conditional. The condition was keeping his mitzvot (commands). Verse 9 in something he made conditional upon obedience.

Therefore it cannot be a command to all humankind and yet conditional to Yisrael.

Yermiyahu/Jeremiah 23:3

1 Ah, shepherds who let the flock of My pasture stray and scatter!—declares YHWH.

2 Assuredly, thus said YHWH, Elohey of Israel, concerning the shepherds who should tend My people: It is you who let My flock scatter and go astray. You gave no thought to them, but I am going to give thought to you, for your wicked acts—declares YHWH.

3 And I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock from all the lands to which I have banished them, and I will bring them back to their pasture, where they shall **be fertile**

and increase (uparu verabu וַיִּפְרוּ וַיִּרְבוּ).

This is the last place we see Parah and Rabbah together. Again it references back to the previous reference on obedience.

Parah is also listed separately on its own in several verses dealing with procreation.

Tehillim/Psalms 128:3

3 Your wife shall **be like a fruitful vine** (Kagefen poriyah כַּגֶּפֶן פְּרִיָה) within your house; your sons, like olive saplings around your table.

Speaking of a wife bearing children.

Yeshayahu/Isaiah 11:1

1 But a shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse, A twig shall sprout from his stock (yif'reh / his fruit/ his offspring יִפְרֶה).

We see that the figurative language to refer to fruitful as ones offspring from Yisha.

Yermiyahu/Jeremiah 3:16

14 Turn back, rebellious children—declares YHWH. Since I have espoused you, I will take you, one from a town and two from a clan, and bring you to Zion. 15 And I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will pasture you with knowledge and skill.

16 **And when you increase and are fertile** in the land (tir'bu up'ritem תִּרְבוּ וּפְרִיתֶם

וּפְרִיתֶם), in those days—declares YHWH—men shall no longer speak of the Ark of the Covenant of YHWH, nor shall it come to mind. They shall not mention it, or miss it, or make another.

Here we see a similar phrase but reversed. Tir'bu (rabbah) and p'ritem (parah). In this statement YHWH states through Jeremiah not as a command but as something that will happen. It ties back to the obedience we say earlier.

Yermiyahu/Jeremiah 23:3

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3 And I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock from all the lands to which I have banished them, and I will bring them back to their pasture, where they shall **be fertile**

and increase (uparu verabu וּפְרוּ וְרָבוּ).

One of the things that happens today is women or men who are barren. In the Tanakh this is represented by the Hebrew word עקר Aqar (6135) which is an adjective from the verb עקר Aqar (6131) which mean to be plucked up or useless.

Bereshit/Genesis 11:30

29 Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah.

30 Now Sarai was **barren (aqarah עֲקָרָה)**, she had no child.

In this verse Sarai is barren or Aqar. The question is why is she barren? There is no indication of a reason for her barrenness. It appears that YHWH can as we will see open or close a womb.

Bereshit/Genesis 25:21

20 Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. 21 Isaac pleaded with YHWH

on behalf of his wife, because she was **barren (aqarah עֲקָרָה)**; and YHWH responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived.

Again Rivkha was barren and only after Yitzchak pleading with YHWH that YHWH opened her womb.

Bereshit/Genesis 29:31

31 YHWH saw that Leah was unloved and he opened her womb (vayif' tach et rach'mah וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת־רַחֲמֶיהָ); but Rachel was **barren (aqarah עֲקָרָה)**.

Was the difference here inequality in that YHWH opened Le'ah womb but made barren Rachel's.

Devraim/Dueteronomy 7:14

13 He will favor you **and bless you and multiply you (ubarakh Pari וַיְבָרֶךְ פָּרִי)**; He will bless the issue of your womb and the produce of your soil, your new grain and wine and oil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock, in the land that He swore to your fathers to assign to you. 14 You shall **be blessed (barukh בָּרֻךְ)**

above all other peoples: there shall be no **sterile (aqar עֲקָרָה)** male or female among you or among your livestock.

This is listed among the blessing for Yisrael if they obey YHWH. No just in offspring or heirs but in livestock also. This again lists fertility to obedience not a command.

Sofetim/Judges 13:2,3

1 The Israelites again did what was offensive to YHWH, and YHWH delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.

2 There was a certain man from Zorah, of the stock of Dan, whose name was Manoah.

His wife was **barren (aqarah עֲקָרָה)** and had borne no children. 3 An

angel/messenger of YHWH appeared to the woman and said to her, “You are **barren**

(aqarah עֲקָרָה) and have borne no children; but you shall conceive and bear a son.

Looking at all these we don't see reading around this a specific reason for the barrenness. However, we do see that YHWH can open and close a womb or even the inner parts of a man. Therefore, does the idea that YHWH commands all to be fertile and make individuals infertile conflict. In my mind it does.

Now you think of the barren woman in the prophets you think of Hanna mother of Shemu'el. However, it does not literally call her barren but closed womb or in Hebrew סָגַר רֶחֶם sagar rechem.

Sagar (5462) is a verb and means to shut up.

Shemu'el Aleph/I Samuel 1:5,6

4 One such day, Elkanah offered a sacrifice. He used to give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; 5 but to Hannah he would give one portion only—though Hannah was his favorite—for YHWH had **closed her womb (sagar**

rach'mah סָגַר רֶחֶמָה). 6 Moreover, her rival, to make her miserable, would

taunt her **that YHWH had closed her womb (kiy sagar YHWH ba'ad Rach'mah**

כִּי־סָגַר יְהוָה בְּעַד רֶחֶמָה).

As we see as with those called Barren that YHWH is attributed with the closing of her womb or inner parts. We know that Elkanah had children with another wife but Hannah was the one without children.

Rechem (7358) is a masculine noun for – inner part or womb

Berehit/Genesis 20:18

17 Abraham then prayed to HaElohim, and Elohim healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave girls, so that they bore children; 18 **for YHWH had closed fast every womb (kiy atzor atzar YHWH ba'ad kol Rechem**

כִּי־עָצַר עָצַר יְהוָה בְּעַד כָּל־רְחֵם) of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, the wife of Abraham.

Here we see the Hebrew word atzar עָצַר (6113), which means to shut. So YHWH because of Avimelekh taking Sarah to be his wife cause all the wombs to utterly shut.

Bereshit/Genesis 30:22

22 Now Elohim remembered Rachel; Elohim heeded her **and opened her womb**

(vayif'tach et-rach'mah וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת־רַחְמָהּ). 23 She conceived and bore a son, and said, "Elohim has taken away my disgrace." 24 So she named him Joseph, which is to say, "May YHWH add another son for me.

In the reference we see that YHWH hears Rachel and her womb is opened or patach. Again, did Rachel do anything that we know of to have this happen to her.

Shemot/Exodus 13:2, 12, 15

2 "Consecrate to Me every first-born; man and beast, **the first issue of every womb**

(peter kol-rechem כָּל־פֶּטֶר כָּל־רְחֵם) among the Israelites is Mine."

12 you shall set apart for YHWH **every first issue of the womb (kol peter-rechem**

כָּל־פֶּטֶר־רְחֵם): every male firstling that your cattle drop shall be YHWH's.

15 When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, YHWH slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, the first-born of both man and beast. Therefore I sacrifice to YHWH **every first male issue of the womb (kol peter-rechem hazakharim**

כָּל־פֶּטֶר רְחֵם הַזְּכָרִים), but redeem every first-born among my sons.'

We see that the first opening or Peter פֶּטֶר of the womb at this point forward belongs to YHWH. His grants the opening of the womb as we have seen and because of the events of the first born being saved he claims them.

Bamidbar/Numbers 3:12

11 YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: 12 I hereby take the Levites from among the Israelites in place of all the first-born, **the first issue of the womb (kol-bakor peter**

rechem כָּל־בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר רְחֵם) among the Israelites: the Levites shall be Mine.

13 For every first-born is Mine: at the time that I smote every first-born in the land of Egypt, I consecrated every first-born in Israel, man and beast, to Myself, to be Mine, YHWH's.

This is simply now assigning the Levi'im as the replacement for the first born as selected by YHWH. Again, the opening of the womb or inner parts and Bakor from Bakar (1060) meaning firstling or firstfruit.

You can see from all that we have studied today that when YHWH blesses and says, in my opinion, it is not a command. For, how could all the barren men and women in the world who could not keep such a command be keeping his ways if they cannot increase? Likewise, we know that sex is not just for reproduction like the animals. It is part of the relationship between and man and a woman. Also in time of Avraham forward a woman who could not conceive was seen negatively. Even today we see this and also men having the same things said about them but to a lesser degree.

Other references to Rabbah used as reproduction:

Bereshit 3:16

Bereshit 7:17

Bereshit 16:10

Bereshit 22:17

Bereshit 26:4, 24

Shemot 1:10, 12, 20

Devarim 1:10

Devarim 6:3

Devarim 7:13, 22

Devarim 8:1, 13

Devarim 30:16

Yehoshuah 24:3