

THE JERUSALEM POST

FEBRUARY 8, 2019

MAGAZINE

SINGLE MOM, BY CHOICE

Israeli women over 35 are increasingly giving up on their 'fairy-tale prince' and turning to sperm donors to realize their dream of motherhood



Cover

- 12 Giving up on the fairy tale
• By ORIT ARFA
- 8 Ethiopian Jewry: Those left behind
• By DAVID BREAKSTONE
- 10 A Star is born
• By TAMAR BEERI
- 16 The lasting stigma of being HIV-positive
• By CARMIT SAPIR VITZ
- 18 From the Amazon to the IDF
• By CASSANDRA GOMES-HOCHBERG

Sections

- 4 Letters
- 22 Arab Press
- 24 Trending
- 26 Wine Talk
- 28 Food
- 32 Tour Israel
- 34 Observations
- 38 Books
- 42 Judaism
- 44 Games
- 46 Readers' Photos
- 47 Veterans



8



12

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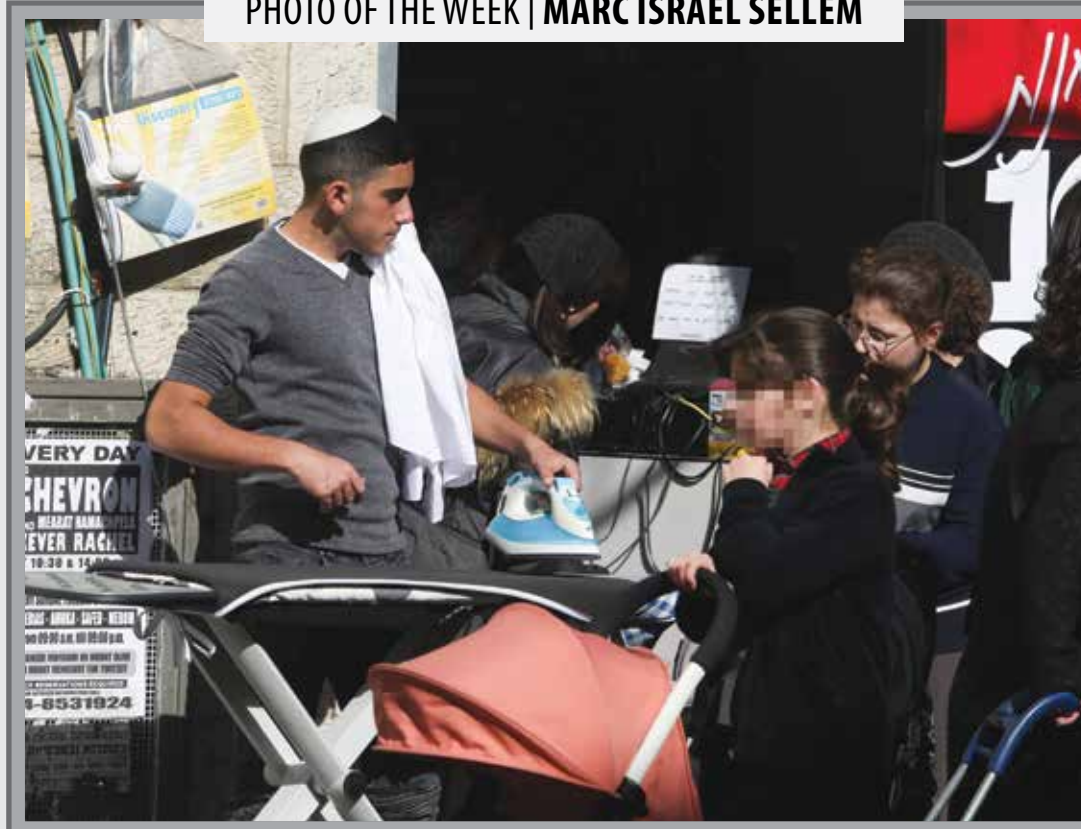
SAY WHAT?

BY LIAT COLLINS

Ain haya kazot אין חיה כזאז

Meaning: There's no such thing; impossible
Literally: There's no such animal
Example: Beware of strings attached to phone company 'free deals.' *Ain haya kazot* completely free.

PHOTO OF THE WEEK | MARC ISRAEL SELLEM



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MAGAZINE

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IT TAKES TIME, EMOTION
AND FOCUS."

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Only a selection of letters can be published. Priority goes to those that are brief and topical. Letters may be edited, and must bear the name and address of the writer.



BRIDAL BRAGGING

Herb, you may think it was raining weddings out there ("It's raining weddings out there," Herb Keinon, February 1), but all that you and your dear wife have encountered is an April shower.

Now *this* is raining weddings: Three of my niece's sons came home in the space of three weeks to announce their engagements. So, of course, three engagement parties were held with much celebration, as we got to know the "other sides." This happened around Sukkot. And then, come the first night of Hanukkah, the first of the weddings joyfully took place. This, of course, was followed with a week of *sheva brachot* and everything else that goes with a nice Jewish wedding.

One month later, in a different locale, the second wedding took place. And this, too, was very joyous and very happy, and it, too, was followed with a week of *sheva brachot* and everything else that goes with a nice Jewish wedding. And then, lo and behold, exactly another month later, the third wedding was held in yet another locale, and it, too, was very joyous and happy. And, of course, this, too, was followed by a week of *sheva brachot* and everything else that goes with a Jewish wedding.

You know what, it was wonderful. Each wedding was so different, and I cried my way through all three *huppot*, as my dear niece, who had planned and cooked her way through three weddings in such a short spate of time, just smiled and smiled and smiled.

Now that, my friend, is "raining weddings." Mazal tov.

BARBARA PFEFFER
Rehovot

GET REAL

Regarding "Mossad, Shin Bet officials: Israel must deal with Hezbollah and Iran, but we can't ignore the Palestinians" (January 25): When reflecting on the impeccable credentials of Arie Pellman and Rolly Gueron, it is good to bear in mind that equally qualified experts in intelligence assured Golda Meir that Israel would not be attacked in 1973.

The false premises of their views are spelled out at the beginning of the article: "withdrawals from the West Bank and rehabilitating Gaza in exchange for quiet." The assumption they make is that we can appease them and get quiet. Why don't the Palestinians say they will stop paying murderers of Jews? Why don't they stop teaching hatred of Jews to

their children?

These experts, whose credentials writer Yonah Jeremy Bob uses to justify their opinions, are incredible. Why does he not mention that what they propose may go further than what has been proposed in the past with no success? I hear the arguments made again by the supporters of evicting Jews from Gaza. Another concession by a super-knowledgeable military man to bring us quiet.

Get real, guys, there is no concession that will give us quiet. If the Palestinians ever wanted peace, they could have had it in the 1937 with the Peel Commission, in 1947 with the UN partition, and at any time since. Unfortunately, peace may come only if Arabs lose hope of destroying Israel, and create a society willing to live in peace with Israel.

PHILIP BRIEFF
Jerusalem

RESPECTFULLY RELIGIOUS

I was very offended by the allegations and insinuations in "Compromise" (Letters, February 1), which referred to the article titled "The haredi community steps out" (January 25) and portrayed this community in a very negative light.

As a haredi attorney having studied/worked in the secular, Modern Orthodox/haredi and non-Jewish worlds – both in America and in Israel – I want to point out some of the inaccuracies mentioned.

Instructors do not have to be of the same gender as their students. Many, if not most of my teachers were male, and I, a female, also taught business law to haredi males. Some of my female friends are nurses, and they do not hesitate to attend to a haredi male. In fact, two of my children were delivered by a haredi obstetrician, and my family doctors in Israel and America are haredi males. My husband's dermatologist in Israel is a haredi woman, and the haredi male Hatzalah responders do not hesitate to treat women.

When I worked with non-Jews, I would often eat my kosher lunch sitting next to someone eating their lunch; whether it was kosher or not did not concern me! We were very respectful of other's religions requirements and tried to accommodate one another. My office would give me

money to buy kosher food for the December "holiday party," whose name was changed to cover all of the religions in the office. When I was hired, my supervisor let all the males in the office know that I do not shake hands with men, and I never had a minute of trouble because of my religious requirements. I worked longer hours from Monday through Thursday so that I would not come in on an *erev Shabbat* or *yom tov*.

I think we would all be better off if we showed more sensitivity and knowledge in our representations of those who differ from us.

TIRTZA JOTKOWITZ
Jerusalem

BOLD VIOLETS

It was most interesting to read Elaine Margolin's review of Deborah E. Lipstadt's latest book and especially her perception of Lipstadt's reticence on the subject of antisemitism ("A moderate approach to antisemitism," February 1). Yet I believe the latest incarnations of antisemitism are nothing more than the perpetrators becoming more emboldened in this social media environment, where we find many are ready to speak or print what's on their mind, whereas before it was somewhat veiled.

This is especially so in what Western Jews would now call an open and free society, possibly as a prewar German Jew would have considered himself as German as any.

I am not predicting the coming of another apocalypse. However, many, as previously mentioned, have become more emboldened and outspoken in their views, typified in the UK by the likes of Jeremy Corbyn, who, as we have come to realize, is a habitual offender. His hatred of Israel has morphed into the antisemitism pervading his party, and a Corbyn-led Labour government would be a nightmare come true, not only for Jews but for all correct thinking people.

It therefore behooves us to not to be shrinking violets but brave and bold in our beliefs of who and what we are and have achieved. It is therefore simply becoming more relevant and obvious to relay: "When someone spits at us – it is now definitely not raining."

STEPHEN VISHNICK
Tel Aviv



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*Get real, guys,
there is no
concession [to the
Palestinians] that
will give us quiet*



PROMINENT RUSSIAN Jews past and present who have helped shape Israel: (from left) Ze'ev Jabotinsky, founder of Revisionist Zionism; Michael Pechatnikov, founder and managing partner, Sharpe Alpha Capital; Kira Radinsky, chief scientist and director of data science at eBay Israel; and singer-songwriter and actress Marina Maximilian Blumin. (From left: Wikimedia Commons; Courtesy; Twitter; Courtesy)

THE RUSSIAN-SPEAKING JEWS WHO SHAPED ISRAEL

A new cooperative 'Jerusalem Post'-Genesis Philanthropy Group project tells the untold story of modern Zionism's Russian pioneers

• ALAN ROSENBAUM

Luminaries such as Josef Trumpeldor, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, Natan Sharansky, Hayim Nahman Bialik, Chaim Weizmann, Moshe Sharett and Levi Eshkol were some of the best-known pioneers who shaped modern Zionism and the State of Israel. What do all of these soldiers, linguists, poets, scientists and politicians have in common? They all represent the community that today is called "Russian-speaking Jews."

Few people are aware of the vital and transformative contributions that Russian-speaking Jews have made to modern Zionism and the establishment of the Jewish state. For many, the connection between Russian Jewry and the State of Israel didn't begin until the 1990s, when close to a million Jews emigrated from Russia to Israel. Now, Genesis Philanthropy Group, a global foundation that works to develop

and enhance a sense of Jewish identity among Russian-speaking Jews worldwide, is trying to correct the record about this common misconception.

A new website, "Seventy Russian-Speaking Jews Who Shaped Israel," has been launched by *The Jerusalem Post* with GPG's support. The goal of the site is to educate as many people as possible about the contributions of Russian-speaking Jewry throughout history. The project highlights the monumental contributions of 70 Russian-speaking Jews who helped create modern Israel, including artists, intellectuals, political and military leaders, and many of the movers and shakers whose legacies and influence can still be felt throughout the world today.

"Genesis Philanthropy Group was launched more than 10 years ago, with the mission of strengthening the Jewish identity of Russian-speaking Jews around the world," says Ilia Salita, president and CEO of GPG. "Russian-speak-

ing Jews have contributed a great deal to the world and helped shape the course of world history for the better. But, without a shared sense of pride, it is hard for future generations to connect to their heritage. We strive – through this project and all of our work – to foster intellectual awareness of and an emotional connection to what has been accomplished by those who came before us, and to inspire the next generation of leaders to step into their shoes."

The 70 Russian-speaking Jews who are included in the project represent a cross section of society, with a wide variety of backgrounds in fields including government, defense and security, Zionism, science and research, business and industry, arts and culture, medicine, technology, sports, social activism and more. Each listing is accompanied by a photo and a brief biography highlighting the subject's contribution to Zionism and the State of Israel. Their stories are inspiring, historical and – in

many cases – the stuff of legends.

To name but a few: the first IDF chief of staff, Yaakov Dori, born in Ukraine in 1899; Prof. Simon Litsyn, coinventor of the ubiquitous USB flash drive, born in Kharkiv (now Ukraine) in 1957; and Avraham Even-Shoshan, author of the authoritative Even-Shoshan Hebrew Dictionary, born in Minsk in 1906. In every area of achievement in the Zionist movement and the State of Israel, the vital contributions of Russian-born Jews are represented proudly.

Salita explains that the project's benefits and educational value are most important for two groups: Russian-speaking Jews around the world, who for too long have not fully appreciated their history, and the Jewish community at large, which can fully honor and preserve its own history only by knowing the full story. Both groups have something unique to take away from the project, and Salita hopes they both will.

First, he says, as the community of Russian-speaking Jews has spread throughout the world, it is important to remind them of their roots and of the contributions of Russian-speaking Jews to Zionism and the State of Israel.

"It's more critical now than ever," he says, "as those next generations of Russian-speaking Jews need to be connected with every opportunity that exists to help them ultimately choose to remain engaged with the Jewish community and involved with Jewish action."

Second, he says, the Jewish community more broadly – including Jews of all backgrounds and in all countries – needs to be made aware of the impact of Russian Jews throughout history.

"Everyone remembers the huge Russian aliyah,

and everyone talks about the Start-Up Nation and the role of the Russian-speaking Jews in helping position Israel as a global technology leader, but that's not enough," says Salita. "We need to make sure that the Jewish world around us understands where we come from, what makes the Russian-speaking Jewish community unique, and the role we have played in shaping Jewish history and the State of Israel."

The many years of antisemitism during Communist rule, Salita says, ironically helped the Russian Jews preserve their identity, "because if the world around you doesn't let you forget that you are Jewish, then there is perhaps no stronger and more immutable force driving your Jewish identity."

Once the Russian-speaking Jewish community became global through aliyah and through immigration to the USA, Canada, Germany and other countries, with state antisemitism gone and little external pressure, Salita says, "we started seeing a significant move toward assimilation. Something needed to be done."

To that end, he explains, "GPG set out to launch and support various institutions, programs and projects to engage Russian-speaking Jewish communities around the world, including Taglit-Birthright, Hillel, Moishe House, Limmud FSU, PJ Library, Yad Vashem, as well as several major universities around the world. Its goal in supporting each of these organizations: to help them understand how they can be more effective and more focused working with Russian-speaking Jews around the world, how they can achieve success with this critically important community."

One of Genesis Philanthropy Group's greatest challenges is helping to integrate Russian-speak-

ing Jews into the communities where they live today. Salita says that North American Jewish communities have been extraordinarily helpful and welcoming to Russian-speaking Jews throughout the years. But, to ensure that these communities continue to grow and flourish, both sides need to understand each other.

"If Jewish communities around the world don't understand the perspective of Russian-speaking Jews and their contributions, then the relationship cannot be nourished and developed on the basis of full mutual understanding and appreciation. That's why we must cultivate understanding of Russian-speaking Jews' contributions, and that's just what we aim to do with this project."

To this end, Seventy Russian-Speaking Jews Who Shaped Israel is an important tool for creating better understanding between Russian Jewry and the Jewish world at large. Research has shown that the Russian-speaking Jewish community has extremely strong links between grandparents and grandchildren, and a very strong passion for the State of Israel.

"This group could help bridge the gap between Israel and the Diaspora communities," Salita says.

"As the 70th anniversary of the State of Israel concludes and we look to an even brighter and more prosperous future, it is vitally important to illustrate the contributions of Russian-speaking Jews, both for their sake, and for the sake of the community at large. Without knowing the past, it's hard to move forward together as one people."

This article was written in cooperation with the Genesis Philanthropy Group.



AFTER TWELVE years of waiting, Emey will finally be brought to Israel on February 13, bringing the pictured child and leaving behind her two married children. (Photos: Courtesy)



BOTTOM: ETHIOPIAN Jewish community members recently approved for aliyah congregate for a briefing at the Jewish Agency's compound.



LEFT: A typical street populated by members of Gondar's Jewish community.

A TODDLER smiles; she has been included in a special nutrition program providing malnourished children under the age of five with a simple meal every morning.

Those we've left behind...

As thousands of Ethiopian Jewish community members still languish in Addis Ababa and Gondar, a few are finally coming home – without their married children

• DAVID BREAKSTONE

After being stranded in Gondar for 12 years awaiting permission to make aliyah, Emey will be arriving in Israel on February 13. She'll be coming with her husband and three of her children, finally to be reunited with an older daughter who was allowed to move here 10 years ago and whom she hasn't seen since. It should be a day of unmitigated joy.

It won't be.

When I met Emey and her husband Melkamu three weeks ago in their one-room home built of mud and straw, where they've lived since leaving their countryside village more than a decade ago, she was in tears.

"How can they do this to me?" she sobbed, begging for my help. "They're making me leave three of my children behind!"

The story is this: The most recent government decree regarding the remnant of Ethiopian Jewry languishing in Gondar and Addis Ababa is to bring a thousand of them to Israel in 2018. That's the good news. The bad news is twofold.

Firstly, even the full implementation of this decision would leave another 7,500 of our brethren behind, all of whom have been waiting to make aliyah for somewhere from eight to 22 years in the harshest of conditions. Secondly, the criteria determining who may and may not come include a condition that is callous and cruel. Those with children already in Israel may come

and bring their unmarried offspring with them, but their married children – and thus their grandchildren – must be left behind.

A Sophie's choice, only this time it's the State of Israel that's demanding it be made. In the name of family reunification, we are tearing families apart – Emey's and Melkamu's among them. Their two married children will not be permitted to move here with them.

SOME BACKGROUND: In 2013, Israel declared it had fulfilled its historic mission of bringing the entirety of Ethiopian Jewry to Israel. That declaration, however, was only in reference to those whose Jewish lineage was maternal. It did not relate to those of patrilineal Jewish descent nor to the thousands whose children, parents, brothers or sisters who were already here but had been left behind for reasons not sufficiently clear.

Two years later, in response to appeals based on humanitarian considerations, the government decided that it would permit all those of Jewish ancestry to be brought to Israel if they a) had first-degree relatives in Israel who requested they be allowed to come, b) had arrived in Gondar or Addis Ababa prior to 2010, c) appear on the community's membership list, and d) declare their intention to convert to Judaism. It is estimated there are some 8,500 who fall into this category.

Though written into that decision that its implementation was to begin within four months and completed within five years, it would take until 2017 for the first of the new immigrants to arrive, and even then the quota was capped at 1,300. A full year would elapse before any further action was initiated. Finally, in 2018, it was agreed that another thousand could come this year, but in accordance with the criteria noted above that were far more stringent than those stipulated in the original 2015 decision. Thus, the separation of families now underway.

The rationale for this draconian ruling? Without the imposition of such restrictions, the argument goes, the Jewish state will be flooded with non-Jews and challenged by the social and economic burden of

absorbing them. A rather spurious position under the circumstances. Though indeed the prevailing rabbinic opinion is that most of the 8,500 who are waiting to come are not halachically Jewish (as well as general recognition that some are married to others with no Jewish roots), the overwhelming majority of community members maintain a strictly traditional Jewish lifestyle and 95% of them convert under the auspices of the Chief Rabbinate within a year of their aliyah.



IN THE meantime, the vast majority of those whom we have kept waiting – even after approving their entry to Israel in principle – are living in a state of poverty unimaginable in the 21st century. Most are living in the sort of single-room, dirt-floor hovels in which I met Emey and Melkamu. It is not unusual for a family of six to occupy a space of approximately 16 square meters with no running water, gas or electricity, sharing with their neighbors common latrines and fire pits for cooking.

Almost no community members have any regular work, sustaining themselves as day laborers and subsisting with the assistance of minimal funds sent to them by relatives in Israel, many of whom are barely able to eke out a living for themselves.

Consequently, much of the community suffers from malnutrition. A comprehensive medical study conducted two years ago by an international team of doctors determined that of the 850 children in the Gondar community up to the age of five, 462 were severely malnourished, potentially leading to irreversible mental and physical damage.

Community members also suffer from inadequate medical attention in general. There is no universal health insurance in Ethiopia and the cost of an appointment with a doctor, never mind that of the tests,

medicines or procedures that might be required, are beyond the means of those in need.

Exacerbating all of this is the fact that community members are essentially "stateless." The circumstances under which they left their villages and "settled" in Gondar or Addis Ababa on their way to Israel are such that they never received identity cards as local residents, meaning they are not entitled to even the meager rights and rations others living in similar conditions receive. They are also trapped where they are, as the lands they left behind have long been taken over by others.

Of course, even if they could return to their villages they wouldn't, as the only land they are interested in returning to is the land of their forebears. The services they conduct three times a day – with an attendance and a fervor that would be the envy of most any synagogue in the world – conclude with a resounding rendition of "Am Yisrael Hai" followed by a passionate reprise of "Hatikvah."

That is also the name of the congregation in Gondar. And listening to them sing reverently of that hope, in their makeshift synagogue, only partially roofed, with its dirt floor, bare metal benches and dim lighting, is at once a sobering, humbling and inspirational experience.

It is also the cause for profound embarrassment. The flight from Addis Ababa to Tel Aviv takes all of four-and-a-half hours. Ethiopian Airlines flies back and forth twice a day. The price of a one-way ticket is less than \$350. The Jewish Agency is prepared to bear the cost. So why are they still there? And why are we in the business of tearing families apart?

We owe Emey and Melkamu an answer. And we owe it to ourselves – and to all those who are yet to be reunited with their loved ones – to ensure that when the current chapter of Zionist history is written, it not be recorded as this generation's Yemenite Children Affair of 70 years ago. Making certain of that is our collective responsibility.

Emey implored me to help her. In her name, I am imploring you as well.

The writer is deputy chairman of the executive of The Jewish Agency for Israel and a member of the directorate of the Ethiopian National Project, organizations committed to bringing home the remnant of Ethiopian Jewry and their successful integration into Israeli society. Write him at davidbr@jafi.org for ways of getting involved with the cause.

The Jewish Agency is the ongoing story of Israel and the Jewish people. "Family Matters" tells that as it is, one chapter at a time.



LEFT: YOUNG Adult members of Gondar's Jewish community take part in a pre-Shabbat study session.

THREE TIMES a day, Gondar synagogue services conclude with a resounding rendition of 'Am Yisrael Hai,' followed by a passionate reprise of 'Hatikvah.'

A Star is born

• TAMAR BEERI

I stepped into the warmly-lit living room of the Cohen residence with a certain unease. After all, stepping into someone's house only to ask about the very basis of their self-identification is not the most comfortable ordeal.

I was immediately greeted by Star Cohen. He had a kindly, shy smile as he shook my hand and led me to the couch. Star's hair was cropped, his jeans were baggy, and his nails were the bright shades of blue and green. I had come to speak to him, in particular: a genderqueer high school student. Soon after, Star's mother, Inbal, joined us.

I had reached Star through his mother's award-winning photography gallery, which presented Star's transition as a genderqueer teen in hindsight. The photos received second place in the local and international press photography exhibition for the category "A Story in Pictures."

None of this did anything to ease my nerves. Star, a 17-year-old from Ra'anana, was genderqueer. I felt as though I was about to tread on eggshells in interviewing him and his mother. Inbal, without hesitation, brought me a glass of water as I set up.

In the meantime, Star began to tell me that he is writing a book and inventing a new language. When Inbal joined, he began to tell me about himself.

"I have known I am genderqueer for almost two years," Star told me. "I remember discovering the term 'genderqueer' and thinking, 'Hey! That's me.'"

Star's candidness immediately eased the tension. When asked what exactly genderqueer is, he explained that it is not man or woman, but rather the taking of traits from each gender to build someone's self-definition.

"The entire process, for Star, was done in a very open way," said Inbal. This was not hard to believe. The fear of having to tread on eggshells eased considerably. "The second he wanted to be addressed in mixed pronouns [sometimes "he," sometimes "she"], he just asked for it. It started with the mixed address, then it shifted to male address."

"I discovered who I am with other people," Star explained. "I didn't have a closet to come out of, per se."

"What was the hardest part of coming out?" I asked him, enraptured.

"The name," Star responded without hesitation. "At first I got a haircut, then asked for a change in pronoun, then a different name."

When asking questions about the surgical process, I hesitated. This is where eggshells may come into play. Star, however, did not show discomfort of any sort. "There was one really nice time when a doctor took my medical forms, looked at me, looked back down at them and said, 'Something is wrong. The incorrect gender is written here.' That was really sweet."

"We had a very positive experience, but that does not mean everyone else does," Inbal clarified. "I always present him by saying, 'This is my son. He is transgender.' I do not open a door for criticism."

"I know of other mothers that, when taking their children to the same medical examinations that Star went through, received criticism," she continued. "Every time we explained the situation, people accepted it. There are people who are not so lucky. This leads to a lot of distress."

When asked to clarify where genderqueer lies on the "spectrum" of male and female, Star explained that it is not that simple. "There's a confusion between sex and gender, and people think those two things go together. That is when they do not understand what I mean when I say I am transsexual," said Star.

Inbal explained, "Biologically, there are different kinds of man and woman. There are many different phenomena on that spectrum. Biologically, it's not something unequivocal."

Inbal described the heart of the struggle of transsexual people, the understanding, as she described, that transsexuality is something natural. "Our culture fears it so much that it shoves it into these two boxes [man and woman]."

"However, there's a percentage of babies, not such a low percentage as you might think, that are born intersex with different qualities of both sexes," Inbal continued. "For many years, the practice was to just choose what sex the child will be for them, but many times, it did not suit them."

"All of this is part of the natural spectrum that we live in and is reflected in research, literature, and even the Talmud," she said.

Research performed by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, as reported in *The Jewish News of Northern California (Jweekly)* upon my later inspection, presented seven sexual categories in classical Jewish legal discourse, with more possible categories yet to be found in the texts. Fonrobert, in her work, explains that gender identification had a high importance in Jewish culture due to gender-based religious rituals, the most prominent and urgent being the brit milah, leading to distress around the gender identification of a child. It was feared, for example, to circumcise a baby who is later discovered to be female and not male due to intersexuality.

"There is no simply 'man' or 'woman,'" said Star, "but even if there were, I am living proof that is not the case, aren't I?"



STAR COHEN, bandages wrapped around chest, post-breast removal surgery. (Photos: Inbal Cohen Hamo)

Inbal explained that transsexual people exist all over the world, even in communities that have no exposure to the phenomena. "When you feel something, it does not come from hearing it and thinking it is nice, but rather your entire body and soul tell you something, that you are a certain gender. Culture gives us the freedom to be who we are."

"Or takes it away from us," Star added.

The meeting point between culture and self-identification is where Inbal's photography exhibit depicting Star post-surgery comes into play. "Before the surgery, I would not agree to be photographed at all," Star told. "And then, after the surgery, mom placed a camera in front of me."

"After the surgery, we both felt a weight lifted off our shoulders," Inbal added. "I wanted to finally tap into this incredible process we went through over the past year so that we can finally look back on it."

"Star wore his heart on display in these photos, which were not easy to take," Inbal said, smiling at her son.

"I get told a lot that I'm brave for supporting him on this journey," Inbal continued. "This is not bravery. To be the parent that your child needs you to be, you do what you have to do."

Star piped in, "Parents, listen to your kids."

With that, I collected myself and bid them farewell. ■

Inbal Cohen Hamo's photo series on Star was displayed at MUSA Eretz Israel Museum Tel Aviv as part of the Edut Mekomit (Local Testimony) annual exhibit.



COHEN CEREMONIOUSLY burns his old bras from a past life.

DISCOVER THE WORLD

2019

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**20 May
9 September**

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**26 February
20 August**

Spectacular Peru

**5 March
9 July
12 November**

India Golden Triangle

**16 Dec 2019
13 Jan 2020**

Japan

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‘TO BE a parent in Israel is almost obligatory’: Israel’s national health insurance system offers one of the world’s most generous fertility packages. (Illustrative; INGIMAGE/ASAP)

Single mothers by choice: A non-fairy tale

Israeli women who find the husband market dwindling as they reach 35 are increasingly turning to sperm banks for that ‘other half’

• ORIT ARFA

Once upon a time there was a beautiful 20-something Israeli brunette in Tel Aviv named Anna. She went on a valiant hunt for her Prince Charming through JDate, OKCupid, nightlife outings and the ever-scarce set-ups (this was before the age of Tinder).

She didn’t think her standards were too high. Ideal-

ly, he should be at least 180 cm. tall; highly intelligent (preferably good at math); Jewish or gentile didn’t really matter; and, of course, attractive, with a pleasant personality. It would help if he were accomplished.

Finally, at age 38, Anna found him – online, from a list of sperm donors provided by Ichilov Hospital, in the form of a mixed European-Russian-Israeli donor. He fit most of her qualifications, at least based on the written description and staff feedback. She couldn’t

even see a picture. But as most of her romantic prospects until that point turned out to be frogs, this time she thought, “He’ll do just fine.”

Today, Anna (all women interviewed requested fictitious names) is the single mother of both a two-year-old prince and a princess, achieved through the petri-dish union of the charming stranger’s seed and some feisty eggs. This Valentine’s Day, Anna will be cuddling with her twins as a single mom by (reluctant) choice.

Where have all the good men gone?

Anna is among the growing number of single Israeli women who are resorting to sperm banks to realize their dream of a family – or rather, their non-dream – of a family without a husband. By the time they have passed the age of 35, many find that the good men are already taken, leaving them with few options during a period of declining fertility.

“Ultimately, I got news from my doctor that my eggs

were running out. I already knew at age 36 that my fertility situation was not so good, so I gave myself a bit more time to find a partner,” Anna said. By then, however, she already felt like “damaged goods.”

“I think until age 30, there are many good men out there. It seems the really good ones stay married, and those in the market aren’t as good and attractive,” she said while folding laundry in her Tel Aviv apartment, where she lives with a Filipino nanny and, sometimes, her very hands-on mother.

In the large hi-tech company where she works as a senior executive, Anna says she can count one single man – in his 50s. The rest are married. At restaurants, bars and clubs, she looks around and counts many more women than men. And they, she says, are by and large, “unattractive, don’t groom themselves, hairy, short, chubby. Women will always look better than them because they can’t afford not to. All the good-looking men are full of themselves.”

When it came to relationships, Anna was a late bloomer, with her first long-term, serious and ultimately failed relationship ending at 31. “In my 20s, I wasn’t mature and ripe enough for a relationship. I made bad decisions.” In her now-or-never frenzy at age 37, she “dated” gay men as potential co-parents to share the burden of childbearing. “I realized for that you also need someone ‘good enough’ – financially, appearance-wise. It’s like dating.”

Finally, she settled on “Sperm Charming.”

“I grew up on the Cinderella fairy tale. It should’ve been that story, but the prince didn’t come. The last thing Cinderella wanted to do was to have a child on her own.”

Among her friends, Anna was a pioneer. Now, three of her single friends have followed in her footsteps and are expecting. Anna belongs to several forums for women who opt for Sperm Charming, like Ronit. In the global company where she works as an internal auditor, Ronit counts four other single mothers.

Now or never

In her daughter, Rina’s, nursery, there are five other children who were conceived through donor sperm. After pushing motherhood off for a few years, Ronit, now 42, set age 37 as her “now-or-never” deadline. She found that she couldn’t date anymore because it was as if she had a sign on her forehead that asked: “Will you be the father of my children?” Like Anna, she also “dated” gay men, but “Mr. Gay Right” never showed up, either.

She carefully calculated her finances and realized she could afford one child on her own. She ordered sperm of Lebanese origin from a sperm bank in California, to avoid the possibility of Rina having half-siblings in Israel. (Anna’s twins, on the other hand, have already met some of their Israeli half-siblings.)

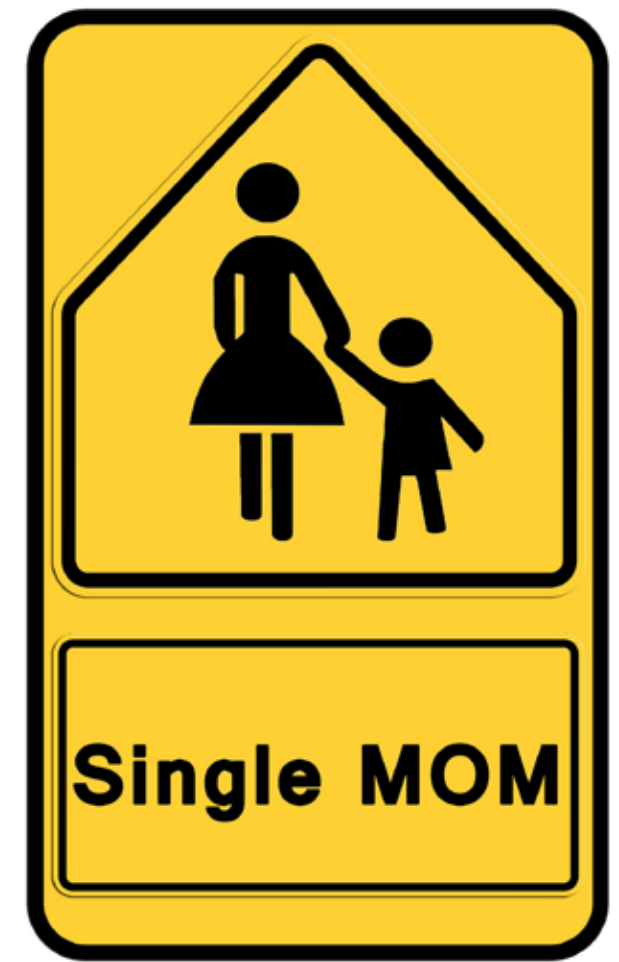
“I don’t think there are no good guys in Israel,” Ronit said from the living room of her one-bedroom Tel Aviv apartment. “I think it’s a matter of phases and my own mistakes. For many years, I chose guys with whom I had no chance of having a child, or even a relationship. Conscious or subconscious, I wouldn’t have considered the good guys. Maybe they were too good.”

Eliana, a Tel Aviv-based company manager, is six months pregnant from the seed of an Ashkenazi Jew with a good sense of humor. “Intelligence was more important than straight hair and eye color,” she said over the phone after an exhausting evening shopping for baby goods following a full day’s work.

Like Ronit, Eliana doesn’t blame the lack of good men, just her own dating choices.

“Then when you get older, your standards go up,” she said.

Some women – like Tanya, 42, a modern-Orthodox Israeli-German journalist – described choosing a sperm donor they could imagine dating.



(Pixabay)

“From the description, I thought it was someone whom I would like. Also personality-wise, I would probably go out with him if a *shadchanit* (matchmaker) would suggest it.”

“Together,” they produced a two-year-old son – the love of Tanya’s life.

Like many women living this non-fairy tale, Tanya is attractive, successful, educated, smart, well-grounded and value-oriented. Tanya thinks “princes” are scared by such women. The men, on the other hand, grow-up on more traditional images of the intellectual and financial male powerhouse supported by the dutiful, supportive wife and mother.

She believes most women over 35 are “over-qualified” for the men in their peer group.

“Men have more choice and I think they subconsciously choose the easier way. It’s definitely easier with women who aren’t so much of an intellectual challenge. I personally met men whom I was very interested in but who told me straight to my face, ‘It’s too exhausting for me.’”

Ironically, she finds that men who are less intimidated are younger, still in the process of achieving their professional and financial goals. The “cougar” dynamic, however, more often than not does not lead to family.

“If I met someone younger, who was 30 and maybe a carpenter, I don’t think I’d have a family with him,” Tanya said. “I might have an affair with him. For marriage and family, we still look for someone on the same level education-wise, finance-wise.”

Jerusalem-based marriage family therapist and relationship coach Micki Lavin-Pell offered an explanation for the seeming gap between highly educated men and women age 35-plus.

“A lot of men who are also academic somehow had managed to balance their careers with dating, whereas a lot of women feel, perhaps, they’ve had to push through the glass ceiling,” she said. “They have to work extra hard to advance their careers. And when



ELIANA, NOW six months pregnant, sought an Ashkenazi Jewish donor with a good sense of humor: 'Intelligence was more important than straight hair and eye color.' (Illustrative; INGIMAGE/ASAP)

they do finally say, 'OK, now I'm really ready to focus on this next stage,' they're shocked and appalled that the men are married or no longer there. Women who are not as advanced in their careers – while they could be lovely and street-smart – are not on the same academic spectrum as they are and there's a big gap in what's left out there."

To be a parent is almost obligatory

While feminism has helped level the educational and professional playing field between men and women, Lavin-Pell said, men still gravitate toward a more traditional family life, with the relationship dynamics of their grandparents' generation guiding their choice of mate.

Furthermore, she cites a statistic that shows one in three young women were sexually abused, which makes them particularly vulnerable and wary when entering relationships. By the time they reach their 30s, they are often too burned to enter a relationship with ease and openness. It's not that they're the proverbial "picky;" it's that they lack trust.

"Being career-focused is sometimes a by-product of that," Lavin-Pell said. "A career is something you can control. A relationship is something you can't."

Prof. Shevach Friedler, director of the infertility and IV unit at Barzilai Medical Center in Ashkelon and a senior professor at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, has assisted hundreds of women become pregnant. In the last five years, he has seen a marked increase in women over 35 who see him at the clinics he serves, concerned about their waning fertility. Fertility declines at age 35 and then free-falls after 40.

"They grow up learning about a prince on a white horse, but reality is much more complicated," he said.

Some women opt to freeze their eggs to redeem at a later date, hopefully with a partner, a medical process that only until recently has been partially subsidized by Israel's healthcare system. Others take the more secure, direct route of artificial insemination, or IVF, with a sperm donation.

"The world has gone through many sociological changes, and women have developed careers," Friedler said. "They are less pressured to marry, and no one arranges marriages anymore."

Following the breakdown of traditional marriage, the growing supremacy of romantic love, women's liberation and medical developments that started with the birth control pill, the phenomenon of single mothers by choice is a logical progression.

Friedler welcomes it. "Children want to be loved and it doesn't matter by whom."

The Israeli government seems to encourage child-bearing – no matter what the framework. Israel is known as a country with one of the highest birthrates in the Western world. The country's national health insurance system offers one of the world's most generous fertility packages.

"All fertility treatments are covered for singles and

couples, fully subsidized up until two children, and partially thereafter," Friedler said. "It comes from the thought that they want to increase the population as much as possible. It's a young country. I'm sure it's based on the trauma of the Holocaust."

Anna said a driving force behind her desire to have children was societal pressure. Most of her friends have children. Israel is a family-oriented society. "With all the pressure there is in Israel, living without children wasn't an option."

The 2016 Israeli census shows that – contrary to what some women over 35 may observe – there is actually a surplus of single men over 35. Never-married Jewish women between the ages of 35 and 39 accounted for 15.3% of the population compared to 20.6% of their male counterparts.

Yet the number of never-married Jewish women who have given birth has steadily increased, from about 1,000 women aged 40-plus in 2013, to about 1,350 in 2017 – and about 1,600 women aged 35-39 in 2013, to about 1,900 in 2017 (an increase of about 1% relative to the population in both cases). For women over 40, the rate jumped by 6% in 2017 from the multi-year average of 2005 through 2009.

One measure of the trend is the flourishing growth of sperm banks in Israel, from a handful in the 1980s to more than a dozen today.

"There's definitely an increase of inquiries in Israel, not just at Assaf Harofeh," said Prof. Ido Ben-Ami, director of the Assaf Harofeh Medical Center sperm bank in Tzrifin. Sperm banks first opened in Israel primarily to serve couples with husbands who had a low sperm count. Now, they predominantly serve single women or lesbian couples.

"To be a parent in Israel is almost obligatory," said Ben-Ami. "It's as if you must be a parent. In the US, you have women who choose not to be mothers. In Israel, it's not considered legitimate to say you don't want to be a parent, not in a country that really encourages childbirth."

Definitely Plan B

While there may be no shortage of single Israeli men, there is a shortage of qualified Israeli sperm donors, who must meet the strict parameters.

"This created a pretty new phenomenon of women requesting sperm donors from abroad," Ben-Ami said.

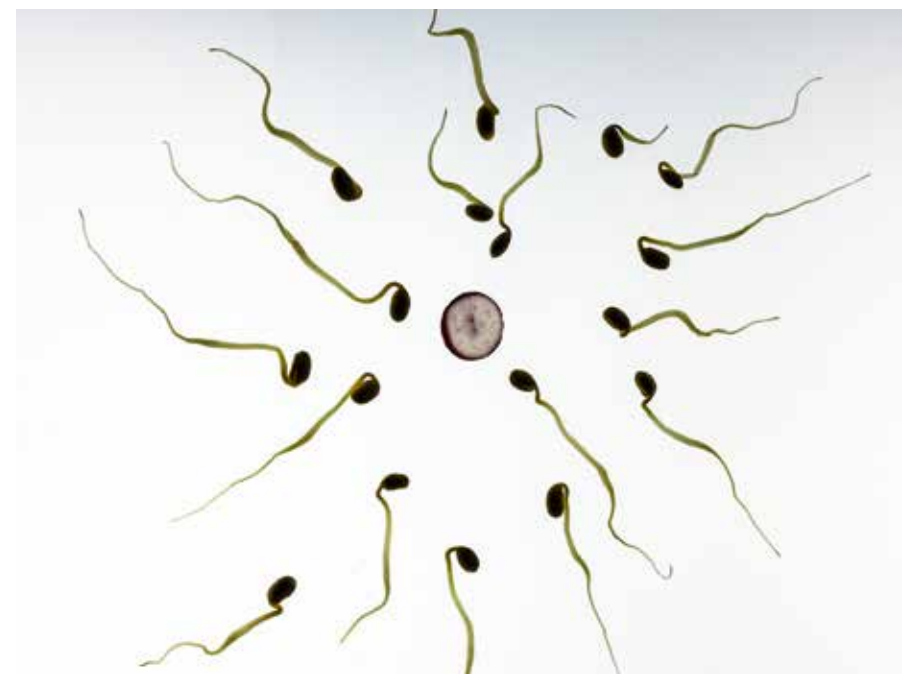
Assaf Harofeh and other sperm banks have partnered with banks in Europe and the United States to give clients more options. For example, Israeli donors must be completely anonymous, while foreign sperm banks offer the extra benefit of "open donors" who



AS THEIR biological clock ticks, some women find themselves 'dating' gay men as potential co-parents to share the burden of child-rearing. (TNS)



WHILE SOME maintain the supply of 'good men' dwindles after age 30, other women blame their dating choices for their lack of finding a partner. (TNS)



RONIT CAREFULLY calculated her finances and realized she could afford one child on her own. She ordered sperm of Lebanese origin from a sperm bank in California, to avoid the possibility of daughter Rina having half-siblings in Israel. (Pixabay)

agree to accept contact with their biological child after he or she turns 18.

Foreign sperm banks also offer more detailed descriptions, and in some cases, pictures of the donor as a child or adult. Foreign sperm, however, comes at a heftier price tag – almost double the cost of Israeli sperm – thus counter-balancing the subsidized cost of the actual treatment.

Many women, however, are willing to pay the price. If they can't date their hunky dream man, they'll vicariously procreate with him.

"I have to say that when I got to run the sperm bank, the prototype the women wanted is the European, not Israeli, look: tall, blond hair and blue eyes," Ben-Ami said.

He's also impressed by the caliber of his single customers. "Their children are impressive as well. Very invested in."

Some women see benefits in going at motherhood solo.

"It's definitely Plan B. But on the other hand, I felt a tremendous relief when I decided on this path and became a single mom," Tanya said. "I was relieved and also in a certain way happy, because I feel so liberated, so free, as if I freed myself from the pressure to find a husband and start a traditional family."

She said it's certainly preferable over a difficult divorce that involves fights over custody, childcare, education and place of residence.

Tanya is now embarking on her journey toward a second child – also solo – to give her son a biological half-sibling. "But I'm still hoping I'll get married some day because I'm worried my son doesn't have a male role model."

Ronit doesn't mourn any lost fairy tale. "I'm not a victim here. I chose the life I wanted to live. And it was a great choice because I have a beautiful, fun, wonderful daughter. I couldn't ask for more, and now I'm starting to date again."

She also sees the positives in raising Rina on her own.

"One advantage is that you're the sole educator. There is no father to say 'X' and no mother to say 'Y.'"

She now enters the dating scene with a lot more maturity and a finer radar. She's looking for a role model for her daughter, too.

"It's easier to date divorcees," Ronit said. "When I was single, they said no because they didn't want more kids."

Eliana believes women who call this path a preferred one are deluding themselves. She would have much rather mothered a child with a loving partner. Still, she's at peace with her very conscious decision.

"I'm optimistic. I decided it's my fate, and I'll succeed with it."

Anna would love to find her prince and browses Tinder and OKCupid when she's not too overwhelmed juggling her full-time job with raising twins. She realized how much life has changed when a familiar face

on OKCupid congratulated her after noticing that she changed her status to single+2. But at least she feels less pressure.

"The hourglass is not standing over my head, and now I can find a man not just for seed," she said.

Still, one of her favorite pastimes (when the children are sleeping) is watching Hallmark movies, wistfully, with the hope – or is it fantasy? – that she can realize a happily-ever-after love story of her own, and a real Valentine's date in the near future.

"Ultimately, I want a relationship, no matter what," Anna said, determined. "Even though I have children, I still long for a partner above all."



'SPERM CHARMING': 'The last thing Cinderella wanted to do was to have a child on her own.' (Loren Javier/Flickr)