

## Teenage Pregnancy – a fresh look at a (not very) old problem

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I dislike working entirely alone. So, recently, I have been talking to quite a few people about teen pregnancy. By “people” I mean not professionals in the field, not fellow researchers, but just “people” – the sort one chats to over a cup of tea in the kitchen. In other words: fellow mums, neighbours and members of my family. My seven-year-old daughter, Shalva, is particularly appreciative of my work and eager to help with anything that puts money in the bank without taking Mummy too far out of the house so she volunteers to be quoted; these are her words: “I am going to get married and start having children when I am sixteen. I want to have twenty children.”

In case you are tempted to dismiss the paper which follows on the grounds that my entire family is clearly delusional, I should concur with you here that it is highly unlikely that my eldest daughter will marry quite as young as she currently intends, or be the mother of twenty – biological chances are somewhat against her (though the mum of one of her school friends is one of eighteen). However, listening to the reproductive aspirations of both my daughters it strikes me that, unusually perhaps for the children of over-educated parents (I have lost track of the number of qualifications my husband and I hold between us) my daughters live in not one but two communities where young motherhood and larger-than-average families are the norm. From a home on a part-privately-owned, part-council estate in a semi-rural area of Yorkshire (looking at my bump, that of one of my neighbours and the other small children around both of us, the bus-driver commented, in a not-necessarily-friendly fashion: “Must be something in the water”) we commute weekly to a Jewish suburb of Leeds, where our children attend a very small, strictly Orthodox school (my eldest has two good friends: one is from a family with 14 children, the other from a family of 12).

In some respects, in terms of expectations around education, family and sexuality, the two communities in which we live could not be more different: in the first, my husband and I are the only couple of our acquaintance with school age children who have been married to one another throughout the conception and births of all our children. The second community, by contrast, is one where single parenthood is still considered an exception (and arises more frequently out of death than divorce or non-marriage), one where teenage girls are expected to wear extremely modest clothing at all times and are strongly urged not to be secluded with – or touch – boys of their acquaintance until marriage. But despite the profound differences between our communities, we must acknowledge this: as a family we move between one cultural milieu where a young woman getting pregnant before leaving school is no particular anomaly – though highly discouraged and frowned upon by the wider society and the professionals with whom we as mothers all deal – and another where a young woman having children whilst still in her teens is almost always a cause for celebration and not for concern or distress. My daughters’ aspirations vis-à-vis baby-making should come as no surprise.

Why is it that I hold my own family’s (anomalous, or at least highly unusual) location and particular experience to be important? A 1989 study by Gale et. al.<sup>1</sup> focussed on neonatal outcomes for young

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(aged between 15-19) mothers in an ultra-Orthodox neighbourhood in Jerusalem – comparing the outcomes for this group with outcomes at the same hospital for mothers of a similar age from other Jerusalem neighbourhoods.<sup>2</sup> The results of that study are important to anyone who is concerned about the problems and adverse outcomes generally associated with teen pregnancy, at least insofar as physical dangers to the infant are concerned. Its conclusions were that such problems result from the underlying experiences of social, economic and emotional deprivation which (in secular, Western society) frequently result in early pregnancy, rather than being an intrinsic or necessary result of the early pregnancy itself.

The findings of the Jerusalem study are, in fact, consistent with those of many other studies – which conclude that the correlation which has been observed between teen pregnancy and negative outcomes for both mother and child does not necessarily indicate that the former is the cause of the latter but rather that both are more likely where the mother has experienced social and economic disadvantage, disillusionment with or a sense of exclusion from the school education system coupled with emotional instability in her life pre-pregnancy.<sup>3</sup> However, the Jerusalem study is perhaps unique in finding not only that outcomes for teen mothers are no worse than outcomes for similarly disadvantaged or “at-risk” mothers who do not bear children as teenagers (a rather convoluted double negative) but that where pregnancy occurs not as a response to disadvantage or misery but rather as a positive choice; where, importantly, there is no stigma<sup>4</sup> but rather young pregnancy is celebrated and supported within the community, the outcome is as *positive* as outcomes for older mothers.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gale R., Seidman D.S., Dollberg S., Armon Y., and Stevenson D.K., (1989) “Is teenage pregnancy a neonatal risk factor?”, *Journal of Adolescent Health Care* 10: 404–408.

<sup>2</sup> These other neighbourhoods being secular (and thus not providing such strong a religious, cultural and social support for young motherhood), the young women giving birth were predominantly drawn from a population more reflective of the type of population in which teenage motherhood is stereotypically to be found in the England and the U.S. – namely, low income, lower educational level and with a much higher incidence of out-of-wedlock conception.

<sup>3</sup> In ch. 5 of *Teenage Pregnancy, the Making and Unmaking of a Social Problem* (“What are the consequences of teenage fertility?”) Lisa Arai gives a useful, tabulated survey of the relevant, recent (spanning the last twenty or so years) research in this area, highlighting where particular pieces of research have attempted to control for confounding factors. The research provides conflicting evidence but what can with certainty be concluded is that there is little firm, evidential support for the kind of assertions and assumptions that have traditionally formed the backdrop to policy: namely that teenage childbearing is a catastrophe which results in poor physical outcomes for mother and child, lower educational achievement on the part of the mother, a cycle of poverty, unemployment, low education achievement and social exclusion for the family as a whole and cognitive, social and behavioural difficulties for the child. Another précis of research which conflicts with prevailing wisdom can be found in the introductory chapter (“What’s the Problem with Teenage Parents?”) to *Teenage Parenthood: What’s the Problem?*, in particular pp.12-15.

<sup>4</sup> Stigma and its influence on both the likelihood of a young woman carrying her pregnancy to term and the experience of teenage pregnancy and motherhood is one of the themes of a particularly interesting doctoral thesis by Sevasti Foka: ‘Teenage Pregnancy and Motherhood in England and Greece: an Evaluation of Different Perspectives’. Like the strictly Orthodox Jewish community, Greece represents a traditional community with strong gender assumptions and where almost all teenage births take place within marriage but (unlike many other such communities) also operating with the comparative wealth and access to medical/psychological expertise of the Western World.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, as Lawlor and Shaw (2002) point out, physical risks to *mothers* from pregnancy and childbirth increase steadily with maternal age so that, as they claim, mothers in their 30s and 40s may be said to

It is this possibility of hope for a positive outcome – not merely the limitation of negative outcomes – that has led me to consider whether sources in the Jewish tradition might be drawn upon (a) to critique existing policy and assumptions and even (b) to suggest an alternative paradigm in which teenage childbearing might become a positive phenomenon – for mother, baby and society as a whole.

*Teenage Parenthood – so what is the problem?*

Given that teenage motherhood cannot be shown to have the disastrous consequences popularly attributed to it, one question with which some researchers have sought to grapple is what precisely it is about young motherhood which is perceived as threatening and non-normative. Various suggestions have been put forward: that teenage mothers (many of whom are also unmarried) have come to replace single mothers as figures of dubious morality<sup>6</sup> as more and more educated, middle-class women have been forced into or opted for single parenthood – and therefore it has become more difficult for that demographic group to be the target of opprobrium; that as adolescence becomes more and more protracted, the drive to preserve the “innocence” of “childhood” becomes even stronger – especially in the face of a culture which sexualises even pre-adolescent young girls.<sup>7</sup> (Adolescent sexuality can be ignored, denied, brushed under the carpet – contraception and even abortion can be made available in a completely confidential environment so that parents do not have to face up to what their children are doing – but a pregnancy carried to term is a pretty hard thing to render invisible.) There is of course a strong economic reason for the middle classes to vilify teenage parents: though many young parents, in particular fathers, experience responsibility for a child as an incentive to become a good provider (cf. for example the chapter “Just a mum or dad”: experiencing teenage parenting and work-life balances” in *Teenage Parenthood: What’s the Problem?*<sup>8</sup>) a young woman with few or no academic qualifications who has had a child before gaining any work experience is viewed as a poor employment prospect. Thus, insofar as she is also statistically more likely than her older counterpart to be a lone mother, there is a considerable likelihood that she (and her child) will be dependent on State benefits. Add to this the fact that in Britain (in common with most developed countries) the majority – though by no means a large majority – of teen mothers are drawn from the lowest two socio-economic strata of society and there emerges the popular picture of the child and his mother on a council estate (an icon of fear and violence for many middle class professionals) living simultaneously (even if these images are somewhat contradictory) in poverty and off the bounty of the tax-payer. It has also been suggested that as the average age of childbearing in

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present more of a “public health risk” than teenage mothers – but there are policy reasons for this being overlooked or ignored.

<sup>6</sup> It might be worth noting in this context that whilst Jewish sources are not exactly positive about sex outside marriage, it is not subject to the sort of total condemnation that it has been in many Christian cultures. Most importantly, children resulting from a non-marital union are not subject to any taint on their lineage – the Jewish equivalent of bastardy results only from the liaison of a married woman with another man or from incest.

<sup>7</sup> Interesting in this respect are the books and articles which, following the language of teenage pregnancy as catastrophe and the phenomenon as an epidemic, refer to “kids having kids” or “child-mothers”. In fact, as Arai points out, the majority of teen mothers (who frequently show up as such in statistics) are adults – there are many more births to 18 and 19 years olds than to under 18s. Some of these young women are married and a significant proportion of the pregnancies of these older teens (married, cohabiting or not) are planned or at least welcomed. (Cf. Coleman and Cater, 2006.)

<sup>8</sup> Alexander, Duncan and Edwards (Ch. 7 of *Teenage Parenthood*).

Western society rises (and the total fertility rate falls) the experiences of (mainly working class) teenage mothers and those of middle class women (whether or not they are mothers) become more and more divergent – thus in focussing on young mothers policy- and media-makers are viewing life experiences which are entirely alien to them and the communities in which they themselves live.<sup>9</sup>

These suggested motivations for the problematisation of teen motherhood are by no means mutually exclusive.<sup>10</sup> I would like, from my own personal and Jewish point of view, to examine particularly the last but hope that the analysis and suggestions I offer will have a bearing on the problem even if ultimately the dominant impetus for teenage motherhood's being perceived as disruptive, negative and/or threatening may in fact be one of the others.

### Janine

Janine<sup>11</sup> and I are standing in my kitchen. She's one of my good friends; we have sons of almost exactly the same age and over cups of (often herbal) tea we have discussed extended breastfeeding, home-educating (she does, I don't), our respective PhD projects ... all of which marks us out, I suppose, as fairly solidly middle class. I mention my current research – this teenage pregnancy paper – and share something that has been troubling me since I received comments from various advisers on my first draft. In that draft, I suggested that far from being the product of ignorance (about sexual health and contraception) or inability to withstand pressure (from boyfriends or peers) – two of the reasons most frequently asserted for teen pregnancies<sup>12</sup> – many pregnancies were wanted or, at the very least welcomed. There is, as I have argued above, at least some evidence to support my suggestion.<sup>13</sup>

I went further, however: I suggested that it is common, even “natural” (in the sense that sexual desires can be described as “natural” even whilst the age of their onset may be influenced or shaped by personal biography and cultural pressures) for many teenage girls to desire motherhood. That is to say: it is not that socially and educationally disadvantaged girls allow themselves to drift into motherhood for lack of any other palatable options; it is not even (just) that girls from particular,

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the conclusions of Arai (2010): *Teenage Pregnancy: The Making and Unmaking of a Problem*.

<sup>10</sup> The range of the essay-chapters that comprise the book *When Children Become Parents: Welfare State Responses to Teenage Pregnancy* edited by Anne Daguerre and Corinne Netival might suggest that in fact teen pregnancy is problematised in different countries for different reasons. (The book seeks to analyse the situation in a number of different countries which the authors consider to be representative of different kinds of welfare state, to have very different incidences of teen pregnancy and to have strikingly different attitudes towards and ways of dealing with the teen parents they have.) For example, it seems that in the United States the argument is largely moralistic – and derives from a more longstanding vilification of (non-deserving) single mothers. In New Zealand, by contrast, the argument against teen pregnancy is more purely economic – with one minister even being quoted as advocating abortion for any young mother herself unable and the father unable or unwilling to adequately support the child. This type of argument would of course be unimaginable in the context of the American right wing.

<sup>11</sup> Names have been changed.

<sup>12</sup> The Government's most recent Teen Pregnancy Strategy document, for example (*Teenage Pregnancy Strategy: Beyond 2010*) claims in its Ministerial Foreword that: “...For a variety of reasons – lack of knowledge, lack of confidence to resist pressure, poor access to advice and support, low aspirations – around 40,000 young women become pregnant each year.”

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the research of Coleman and Cater, 2006.

disadvantaged communities choose motherhood as a local-culturally accepted, even respected life choice. Rather, I suggested, motherhood may be viewed as an attractive, fulfilling life choice by many young women from all socio-economic strata. However, girls from middle class backgrounds who have risen with relative ease within an education system which is orientated towards paid work (of particular kinds) and does not foster the kind of skills which will be useful for childrearing will be much more likely to have absorbed the values which that system is designed to inculcate – amongst them, the prioritisation (both temporal and ideological) of economic self-sufficiency and individual identity over motherhood.<sup>14</sup> The dominant ideology teaches (and middle class girls are dangerously good students) that until we are economically independent, until we are fully mature (a quality whose definition may seem elusive), until we have “lived our own lives” we will be inadequate parents. In fact, Pam Alldred and Miriam David<sup>15</sup> suggest that the opposite may sometimes be true: the experience of life as an independent, unencumbered individual and the assumption that that experience is the normative one makes the transition to the demands and responsibilities of parenthood harder, not easier. Therefore, the desire for motherhood, I suggest, is in middle class girls more likely to be denied.

One of my respondents to an earlier draft of this paper wrote that he would require “overwhelming evidence” to be convinced of my hypothesis.

I offer Janine a biscuit. Ultimately, I have no overwhelming evidence; I can only offer that most unscientific piece of evidence: namely, my own experience. I remember being a fifteen-year-old yearning and longing to become pregnant and have a child. I remember the same desire at age 18 and on through my twenties. I remember talking to some of my friends who felt similarly. I saw the desire in the eyes of one of my (year 11) students when my present bump finally became visible. Am I a freak?<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> My thinking here, or rather, the language in which I have chosen to express it, has been influenced by such researchers as Wilson & Huntington (2006) and Alldred & David (2010) who argue that young motherhood represents a different (and quicker) pathway to adulthood than the slow maturation offered by prolonged education and the kind of slow career establishment that marks the professions. Moreover, Wilson & Huntington point out that it is only in recent years that public policy has effectively reversed from encouraging women to have homemaking and childrearing as their primary identity and regarding as deviant those women who sought to work outside the home (especially when they were also responsible for young children) to demanding that women be economically self-sufficient even when (sometimes solely) responsible for raising young children.

<sup>15</sup> “‘What’s important at the end of the day?’ Young mothers’ values and policy presumptions”. Their contribution constitutes ch. 3 of *Teenage Parenthood*; cf. especially pp. 29-30.

<sup>16</sup> I have since found (not “overwhelming” evidence but one small scrap) in the research of Jewell et al. (2000) a quotation from their interview with one young woman which I believe attests to precisely the sort of conflict which I suspect exists for many teenagers. A 17-year-old whom they describe as being from an “advantaged” background responds to one of their questions: “I have quite often thought about it because I do love children and can’t wait to have children so, but I think if I got pregnant now, I would be very stuck to make the decision, but I don’t really want children now because I have got so much ahead of me, so I probably would end up having an abortion.” Her “I can’t wait to have children” and her “I don’t really want children now”, occurring in the same sentence betray a conflict between desire and (perceived) sensible behaviour. I would strongly suggest that more qualitative research be carried out into the attitudes of young women from all social strata towards motherhood.

In response, Janine tells me the story of her younger sister. Her “sister” (actually, they are genetically unrelated but were raised together as the only two girls in a care facility for boys)<sup>17</sup> was a teen mother who is now (at 30) the matriarch of a family of 8 children – two of whom are her current partner’s by two other women. The most recent pregnancy was a genuine accident, the child being, apparently, conceived during the first fortnight following the birth of the previous child – before she could avail herself of contraception. But the other pregnancies were desired. There was a point when she had three children and tried to get a job, but as a mother with no work experience and few qualifications she couldn’t find employment. Thus there was no disincentive to her becoming pregnant again. Janine’s sister lives on a council estate in one of the Government’s teenage pregnancy “hotspots”. Most of the young women who get pregnant on her estate claim that they didn’t mean to. That’s what the professionals whom they have to deal with want to hear so it makes life easier for everyone to pretend.<sup>18</sup> But there isn’t one of them who doesn’t know about contraception. What she says tallies with my own schoolgirl experience: from the second or third year onwards<sup>19</sup> there were girls both in my year and in the years above who got pregnant. Some chose abortion and some to continue their pregnancies and leave school sometime before the birth. With the possible exception of one girl who had serial abortions and significant learning difficulties, none of us needed Government initiatives, school biology lessons or, indeed, parents open to discussing that sort of thing in order to know about contraception and when it is needed.

Janine would not choose her sister’s life or make the same relationship or parenting decisions. But the story she tells has some poignancy: Janine and her partner are currently having a second attempt at IVF; it will probably fail: in her mid-thirties, Janine is showing all the signs of early menopause. They would have liked a large family – and have one, much-loved son. Janine, like me and like her sister, desired children in her teens. However, she was a good girl and believed the have-it-all narrative of the 80s with which we were both raised. She completed her education, earned a good salary, thought she would return to work soon after having Jake and only then discovered that what she wanted after all was to be a mother full time.

As for me, I wasn’t a particularly good girl. I too went through education, higher education, post-graduate degrees and work (though not necessarily in that order) and did not become a mother until my early thirties, but only because I didn’t find the right partner and knew that single parenthood was a challenge I wasn’t emotionally or socially placed to deal with. Still in my thirties, I too have been diagnosed with peri-menopause, but I have been lucky enough to recently give birth to my fourth child – another son.

### Being Jewish

And so I wonder. I wonder whether the portrayal of teenage pregnancy as necessarily calamitous does not in part arise from middle class need to justify our own life choices – choices which create a socio-economic climate which in turn limits the choices available to others: in many parts of the country it is simply impossible to provide for more than one (or at most two) children without two good incomes (thus effectively barring the mother, or indeed the father, from full-time parenting) or recourse to considerable outside financial help. We have created a socio-economic climate where that is the norm. We have also internalised from our culture and in turn perpetuate the belief that

<sup>17</sup> Being raised in care is a strong predictor of young motherhood (Garnett, 1992; Barn and Mantovani 2007; and see the discussion in Arai, *Teenage Pregnancy* pp.36-37).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Arai, 2003; Coleman and Cater, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Years 8 and 9 in the current system.

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parenting, specifically mothering, is something to fear – something which will entrap us and something which we are in danger of doing so badly that we will permanently damage our children. It is these beliefs which, at least in part, inform the prevailing narrative about teenage mothers – according to which the mother’s prospects for a fulfilled life are destroyed by her child and his, in turn, are destroyed by her having had him too young, irresponsibly unprepared. Responsible adults ask before choosing to conceive: “Can I afford another child? Can I cope with another child?” Perhaps the all-too-frequent answers are the reason why, according to some studies, women’s desired family sizes are frequently unmatched by their actual (ultimate) family size.

“Can I manage another child?” Judaism has traditionally prohibited or at best discouraged the use of contraception.<sup>20</sup> The commandment to reproduce – interpreted as having at least one son and one daughter or, according to one authority, two sons<sup>21</sup> – is a central one which a man may not seek to avoid. Above and beyond that commandment, there is a wish that we should “fill the earth”. Thus having many children is considered a blessing and a joy, but the fact that it is considered to require (on the man’s part at least) a commandment to ensure that we reproduce suggests an

<sup>20</sup> Traditionally, any attempt to effect complete sterilisation of the man has been entirely forbidden as has the destruction of the male sperm (by spermicidal agents) or any method which tangibly prevents sperm reaching the female uterus (most notably, the condom). The prohibition on a woman’s using contraceptive measures which do not affect the sperm but rather act by preventing ovulation, fertilisation or implantation is less clear: generally, the rabbinic tradition would allow her to do so if there is any substantial threat to her life or health from a further pregnancy, and even in the case of a less severe threat (which may include a threat to her psychological wellbeing) in a case where her husband has already fulfilled his procreative obligation (i.e. he has – through this woman or another – a son and a daughter). This is notwithstanding the fact that in a “best case scenario” the couple would be halakhically encouraged to have a larger family. Economic reasons have never traditionally been considered sufficient grounds for the use of contraception in a case where the couple (or the husband, if he has been previously married) has not yet had children – which would of course be the case for the overwhelming majority of couples in their teens or early twenties. Interestingly, a recently published article (Moshe Kahn: “The Halakhic Parameters of Delaying Procreation”) *has* argued for the permissibility of contraception to delay childbearing for economic, social and psychological reasons. However, this article arises out of a self-consciously *Modern Orthodox* (and American) context which accepts as a given the necessity and desirability of the (modern) socio-economic framework which I seek in this paper to call into question. Thus Kahn writes that: “Some of [the young women wishing to employ contraception] and their prospective husbands intend to pursue graduate study, they are torn by a perceived difficulty in managing baby and career. Others, who may be leaving their childhood home for the first time, are struggling with a lack of confidence in their ability to assume parenting roles.” Kahn’s solution to the problem – permission to use contraception – is certainly valid, but I argue that more structural solutions (seeking ways in which a baby and career can be combined more easily and fulfillingly; supporting young people to realise that they are not unable to be good parents) should also be considered – especially as these may lead to a greater sense of real choice in the lives of young people. Moreover, it is salutary to note that though Kahn is dealing with a population who must be in their twenties and not in their teens (to be considering graduate study, for instance) he refers to one of the central beliefs about the dangers of early childrearing that I have attempted to call into question in this paper – namely, that young parents are “psychologically immature and emotionally insecure” (language his). If this is the way that young adults are viewed by professionals, then it is no wonder that they are uncertain of their own abilities to enter the adult world (in this case, of parenting). For a historical account of Jewish views on contraception, see David Feldman: *Marital Relations, Birth Control and Abortion in Jewish Law*; for modern attitudes, see Immanuel Jakobovits, *Jewish Medical Ethics*.

<sup>21</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Yevamot 61b.

acknowledgement that there may sometimes be a temptation to put our own comfort (practical, emotional and economic) first. Judaism, it seems, wears no rose-coloured spectacles and knows that parenthood is challenging. And that it is, nonetheless, a project in which we should all, so far as possible, engage.

On the other hand, Jewish sources do have a discussion on whether or not it is responsible to have a child one cannot afford. This discussion is expressed as one about the age at which a man should marry – and the grounds for delaying marriage. It has its roots in the Talmud (Kiddushin 29b-30a and 119b) where the general consensus is that a man should acquire a trade before he acquires a wife and it reaches perhaps its most forceful expression in the rulings of Maimonides: “It is the way of sensible people to obtain a job that will support them, then to buy accommodation and then to get married ... Stupid people start by getting married, then buying a house if they can afford one, and then, towards the ends of their lives, try to find a job, or else support themselves by charity.”<sup>22</sup> The tabloid press could not perhaps put it so vehemently or conservatively. However, Maimonides’ starting assumption is that all men *can* obtain a job which will support their family – and he expects them to be able to do so before they leave their teens. In *Hilkhot Ishut* (the Laws of Cohabitation – which also forms part of the Mishneh Torah) he stipulates that the commandment to procreate starts at age 17 and that one who has not married by the age of 20 is considered to be transgressing it.

Not only does Maimonides assume a socio-economic environment where a man can acquire a trade and begin to use it to bring in an income before the age of 20, he also assumes that the burden of financial provision for a family falls squarely on the shoulders of the husband. This is not necessarily the case with other (especially earlier) Jewish sources. That is to say, the classical Jewish ideal of family life, whilst being highly gendered, is *not* the Victorian ideal: the woman is not generally assumed or exhorted to be an “angel in the house”; rather, she was from earliest times (as indicated below) expected to contribute to the economic stability of the household. This is important in the context of my own analysis of the teenage pregnancy “problem” because I have framed it as arising, in large part, out of a conflict between different conceptions of the proper role for a woman: teenage motherhood is acceptable in local contexts which posit traditional gender roles so that the young mother’s decision to have a baby (rather than opting for abortion – an outcome which is much more prevalent in more affluent communities) makes moral as well as pragmatic sense. It is unacceptable in a wider society which holds the participation of women in work outside the home (something which teenage childbearing makes much less likely) to be a moral as well as an economic good. My reason for believing that Jewish sources can help us to navigate this conflict will become clear, then, if I argue, as I believe, that the (or at least “a”) Jewish paradigm is one of “gendered equality” – a paradigm in which (though it is far from perfect!) women’s participation in the economy<sup>23</sup> is taken almost for granted but their role in the home is uncompromised.

A Biblical passage still traditionally sung before dinner on the evening of the Sabbath<sup>24</sup> extols the woman who seeks out wool and linen to work with, appraises a field and buys it; and with the proceeds of her own handiwork plants a vineyard. Similarly, the mishna which enumerates the “services” a husband may expect of his wife<sup>25</sup> includes among them (alongside domestic chores such

<sup>22</sup> Mishne Torah, Hilkhot Deot 5:11.

<sup>23</sup> At least in the time period and broad social class which gives rise to the discussion in the Talmud. In other periods and amongst much wealthier families women might of course have been relieved of non-domestic (and, in the case of rich families, many domestic) duties; alternatively the bringing in of a large dowry might sometimes have substituted for the woman’s contribution through work.

<sup>24</sup> Proverbs 31:10-31.

<sup>25</sup> Ketubot 5:5.

as baking) the making of woolen goods to sell. These ideas are further developed in the Talmud, which goes on to question precisely how rich a family unit must be (in terms of their ability to employ servants) in order for the woman to be exempted altogether from economically productive work. One view<sup>26</sup> is that she can never be entirely exempt because the boredom would be bad for her – thus acknowledging that a woman benefits psychologically as well as financially from engagement with the workplace.

The same mishna which obligates a wife in work, however, also obligates her in nursing her [husband's] child and a mishna further on in the same chapter (Ket. 5:9) acknowledges that the woman's ability to be economically productive is reduced during the time that she is breastfeeding, i.e. wholly preoccupied with the needs of a young child. It is worth mentioning in this context that the classically sanctioned age for weaning is not younger than two years (though probably not much older than three) and that "nursing" in halakhic culture (as in most traditional breastfeeding cultures) suggests minimal, if any, separation of mother and infant. A woman is halakhically assumed, for example, not to experience menstruation whilst nursing – and scientific research demonstrates that such amenorrhea past the first few months after childbirth is common only where the mother breastfeeds on demand, sleeps with her child and is in close physical contact with him or her for most hours of the day and night.<sup>27</sup>

The mishna in Ketubot 5:9 also stipulates that whilst her productivity decreases during the period when she is pregnant and nursing, the level of nourishment to which the woman is entitled rises. So she is certainly not expected to be economically self-sufficient whilst also being responsible for the care of a young child.

Thus we might say that classical Jewish sources envisage two distinct, "ideal" roles for women. When a woman is unencumbered by a child's physical or emotional needs, she is expected to exert herself and be economically productive – and is highly praised for achieving wealth. When she is needed for childcare, however, the child's needs are paramount. Even if she is divorced or widowed – i.e. she has become a single parent – she is obligated in (and may indeed be coerced into) nursing the child she has borne to her ex-husband.<sup>28</sup> During this time, she is entitled to be paid as a wet nurse. That is to say: there is no situation in which a woman is expected *both* to care for a young child *and* to be sole or main provider for her family. Whilst a woman may, at different stages of her life, experience either her economic identity<sup>29</sup> or her mothering identity as primary, once she is the mother of a young child who needs her, the primacy of motherhood is decided for her, and she may not choose to withdraw into a more independent, economically focused identity.

<sup>26</sup> That of Rabbi Eliezer in the mishna Ket. 5:5, cf. also the discussion in Babylonian Talmud, Ket.61a.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Kippley, *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing*.

<sup>28</sup> Tosefta Ket. 5:5. The divorced wife is only *coerced* into caring for her ex-husband's child from the point at which the infant recognizes her as his mother, from which point it is considered *dangerous* (the Hebrew word here used – "*sakana*" is one generally used to connote danger to life or limb) for her to refuse to nurse him. It is from this latter point that I deduce that the Halakha perceives the child's psychological needs to be as pressing as his physical needs – if another woman can be hired as a wet-nurse for a newborn, there is no *physical* reason why another woman's milk should not be adequate for the child once he has become a little older.

<sup>29</sup> A wife is entitled to choose to be economically independent of her husband – keeping the proceeds of her own work in lieu of relying on his obligation to support her economically (Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 77b).

Why is it I hold this Jewish paradigm to offer such opportunities to us today as we seek to improve the lot not only of teen parents but of other women too? Simply that the studies I have seen seem to view traditional and modern liberal societies as two opposing models of community – either we move “backward” to a heavily gendered society where women are valued for the roles in the home and family but not encouraged to venture out much more, or we accept the costs as well as the benefits of an individualist society where women are more or less emancipated but where they are much less supported in any endeavour to raise a family. Such lack of support includes an economic structure in which many families are dependent upon two full-time wage-earners to sustain a reasonable standard of living and which also creates a situation in which friends and members of the mother’s extended family are similarly overextended – bound up in their own independent struggles to an extent where it is difficult for them to find time or energy to offer the emotional and practical support upon which the young (or, even, older!) mother could once rely. The Jewish sources, by contrast, suggest that we should have it both ways! Not at the same time, as the modern “supermum” paradigm would have us try to do – this may be possible given a very affluent household but conflicts both with any traditional conception of motherhood and with modern expectations of career-professionalism (we don’t expect our lawyer to be wearing a reflux-stained sweater or to hear children arguing in the background when we call the fax machine repair line). But rather, we can have all things in succession.

It may be objected that, in the case of single mothers (a population which, as we have seen, does not include a large proportion of teenage mothers), a validation of their desire to be full time mothers to their young children burdens the taxpayer with their financial support. This is true. Which in turn requires us to view children not as the “property” of their own parents but rather as a blessing to, responsibility of and future resource for our society as a whole. When the Jewish community celebrates a birth, engagement, marriage or bar mitzvah we sing about the joy that will accrue (we hope) to the whole community. Being willing to contribute economically to the raising of the children of others also, of course, means being able to trust that we ourselves will be able to draw on the support (practical and financial) of the wider society or the State to raise our own children.<sup>30</sup> This is, of course, why (recently-abolished) non-means tested child benefit was initially introduced – to acknowledge that child-bearing and raising is a socially beneficial activity and to acknowledge also that very few people can (or may be expected to) afford to provide adequately for their own children in the kind of society which we now wish to create. That, after all, is why we also have a national health system (with free children’s prescriptions and dental care) and state schooling.

<sup>30</sup> Here it is interesting to note, as do Daguerre and Nativel (*When Children Become Parents*) that there appears to be a complex relationship between the incidence of teenage pregnancy, public perception of young motherhood as a problem or not, the extent of the hardship which young mothers experience and the type of welfare state in operation in a particular country. Some of the lowest rates of teenage pregnancy can be found in Scandinavian countries (Daguerre and Nativel focus on Denmark and Norway) where State provision for all parents is most extensive. Many reasons could be posited for this – amongst them that these countries represent rather more socially conformist societies than, say, the United States or Britain, or that it tends to be the case that the greater the socio-economic disparity in a region or country the higher the rate of teen pregnancy in that locality. (It has also been suggested that the low rate of teen pregnancy in these countries has little to do with economics and much to do with national relaxed attitudes towards sex and extensive sex education in schools.) However, one might also suggest that the relative lack of hostility towards young parents in these countries (and thus the greater chance of integration of young parents into mainstream society) is in great part due to the fact that middle class and older mothers do not see (or imagine) teenage parents receiving support, economic and other, that they themselves do not receive: all parents receive a greater amount of support.

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And, to reiterate the point I drew from the Jewish sources: it isn't forever. As another piece of Biblical poetry reminds us (Eccles. 3:1-2, 8):

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:  
a time to be born and a time to die,  
a time to plant and a time to uproot, ...  
a time to love and a time to hate,  
a time for war and a time for peace.

The passage goes on to ask, incidentally, what a worker gains from all his toil – a question well worth asking about our own life-work balances – balances called into question perhaps by teen mothers' decisions on the timing of childbearing.

### **Recommendations**

Different readers will use the ideas I have presented in this paper in different ways to propose different solutions to the mismatch between teenage fertility and the expectations and structure of our modern society. What follows are merely suggestions that arise in my own mind from my engagement with the material.

#### *1. The de-stigmatisation of teenage pregnancy.*

The Jerusalem study demonstrates that in the absence of stigma, teen mothers can flourish just as much as older mothers. Other studies, such as Eleanor Formby, Julia Hirst and Jenny Owen's "Pathways to adulthood: Reflections from three generations of young mothers and fathers" (ch. 5 of *Teenage Parenthood*) attest to the way(s) in which awareness of society's negative assessment of teenage parents negatively impacts on the young parent's sense of her own capability. As they write (p.107): "A fragile sense of self was often referred to in connection with notions of being seen as the stigmatized 'other'... negative public and professional discourses about young parents ... were experienced as undermining parenting skills, decision-making, and self-worth. In some extreme cases this led to severe depression." The last sentence is, of course, highly ironic given the fact that higher than average levels of post-natal depression are often cited as one of the ill effects of teenage motherhood.

#### *2. Support systems*

As we see, once again from the Jerusalem study, mothers flourish when they have adequate support. All mothers need the support of more than just their partner – but partner support is ideal. Judaism has a strong and very practical sense of community but has an equally strong sense of the importance of the family: childbearing and, more importantly, childrearing is not envisioned as happening outside of marriage (an angle I have not focussed on in this paper). Many studies show young fathers often feel excluded by professionals who frequently presume that the young couple's relationship is doomed to failure. But that is a self-fulfilling prophecy; sustaining a relationship is especially difficult in a climate of disapproval or incomprehension.

In the event that child-rearing should happen outside of a partnership – in the case of teen mothers as of any other mothers – then it is vital also to try to foster other long-standing relationships – for instance, not housing new mothers on estates far away from their existing family and friends, and not expecting professionals to take the place of natural or more long-standing support systems.

3. *Money counts*

Economic dependency is not a cul-de-sac but can be what the welfare state was always meant to be: a temporary solution. This leads me to advise that we always:

4. *Take the longer view*

The assertion that dependency need not always be dependency only makes sense if there are genuine opportunities for those who have been young parents to gain entry into well-paid, fulfilling employment at a later stage. This requires, firstly, the de-stigmatisation I have stressed as necessary elsewhere: potential employers, universities, landlords need to think of young motherhood as a positive choice rather than a signal of a woman's being a victim, unintelligent, immoral or a no-hoper. It also requires economic support for women to return to education and training when they are long past the age of being able to rely on parental support, when they are responsible for the maintenance of children as well as themselves and where childcare makes it unworkable for them to hold a part-time job to finance themselves through college.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, what I have presented as the Jewish paradigm may encourage us to develop new expectations regarding motherhood and work. Instead of insisting that employment must come first, both temporally and (by implication) in terms of priorities – a paradigm that makes most biological sense for *men* – we might arrive at options which foster what I might term “gendered equality”, where women's different priorities and different pathways through life are no longer considered deviant<sup>32</sup>, no longer exclude women from economic success (except by attachment to a rich partner), no longer limit women to low-status positions with little chance for a sense of job satisfaction but rather celebrate the fact that women can, in fact, do it all – have it all. Just not all at exactly the same time...

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<sup>31</sup> Though its American context creates some differences from the British experience, Lori Holyfield's book *Moving Up and Out* is a powerful argument for the importance of supporting single parents financially through their return to education, not least because the giving of such financial support affirms a belief in the person being educated – who may have had negative experiences of education as a child and/or suffer lowered self-esteem from being part of a stigmatised sub-population. As well as demonstrating that single parents are frequently highly motivated to learn and eager to return to or enter into the workplace (provided that this can be combined with their childcare duties – something which is less likely when the work is unskilled and underpaid), Holyfield's book suggests that having a parent return to school can have a positive effect on her child's engagement with the education system – an important finding given that one of the problems ascribed to the children of teen mothers is academic failure.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Deviant (M)others (Wilson and Huntington, 2006).

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