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This pregnancy guidebook for Jewish women highlights the lenses through which religious women, living in Israel, interpret and experience their pregnancies, births, and childrearing. Weisberg infuses each section of her book with poems, Talmudic passages, Chassidic stories, women’s prayers, and rabbinic essays on pregnancy and motherhood for women to contemplate and use.

The bulk of the book consists of lengthy interviews of twenty-four religious women, two midwives, and four rabbanitot (female religious teachers). These women’s stories, descriptions, and explanations of motherhood convey their constructions of gender roles and religious selves. Weisberg’s great strength is her ability to elicit candid, deep, and insightful responses to personal subjects from many different women. The difficulty is that these interviews don’t fit neatly into the categories she constructs for the book.

In her commentary, Weisberg focuses on identifying miracles these women experience in relation to pregnancy, and their belief in God’s protective and instructive control of their lives. The framework of assuming God’s presence in life comes along with the necessity for these women to primarily identify with motherhood and all its physical work.

Miracles and God’s control pulse through the paragraph headings, offering a unifying idea in a book loaded with wide ranging personal and social information. The stories often reflect women’s ambivalence even to their eventual acceptance of the Godly mission of motherhood. For example, one woman who struggled to find satisfaction in motherhood as her primary role and identity stated,

> It’s a paradox, because I’ve become much more spiritual and at the same time I’ve accepted that being a mother is a mostly physical role...I see now that this is what real chesed (charity/loving-kindness) is. We have so few opportunities to do real chesed nowadays. If we don’t invite this guest for Shabbat someone else will, but if I don’t make the bottle for this screaming baby, no one else is going to. It is sheer chesed. It gives me satisfaction. Maybe I put it into the category of chesed because I want to feel that I’m doing something exalted, instead of just washing a bottle at three o’clock in the morning. Even if this is just a way to make myself feel better, it makes me happy (105).
Weisberg places this excerpt under the heading, “Changing Attitudes toward Pregnancy.” I found this excerpt, and most of the others, to contain conflicting attitudes rather than a single changed one. If motherhood is actually as unqualifiedly meaningful to this woman as Weisberg asserts, why would she need to make herself feel better by framing it in terms of the ultimate kindness?

Weisberg clearly admires these women’s feelings of Godly intervention. For example, she interviews one woman who committed to a religious lifestyle, married, and was expecting a child all within four months. These rapid drastic lifestyle changes, however, meant that she and her husband had to live with others. Weisberg focuses on her attitude of God helping them through rough times, but one has to wonder, how she came to accept these conditions in the first place. The reader is left to wonder whether trust in God means drastic changes in lifestyle for women without sufficient resources.

There are many golden moments in this book. For example, Weisberg presents a midwife who cares equally for all clients, Jews and Arabs alike. This same woman moved to Kiryat Arba, a Jewish settlement/community just east of Hebron where carrying a gun to feel safe is standard practice. Her story is a challenge to readers who would otherwise assume that her residence and kind of professional empathy would be impossible to maintain. I was also struck by the outlier woman who rejected her community’s concept of “natural childbirth” when explaining that she felt no qualms about using epidural treatments, she instead interpreted the whole birth process as natural whether a woman uses pain medication or not.

Read as a whole, however, Weisberg and her informants persistently assert their orthodox/Chassidic notions of pregnancy and motherhood as superior to, in conflict with, or under attack by secular/“western” conceptions and practices. For example, Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller states,

We live in an anti-child society (Western society). Children are a blessing and they make their parents more than they were on every level...But the society that we have (Western society) see the children we have in every way as not a blessing, they are seen as emotional drain, a physical drain, because we are taught to see giving as being bad for you and taking as being good for you (34).

Assigning a unified negative face to “western/medical” culture serves an important purpose for Weisberg and the other women who have had conflicts over equating motherhood and self. In order for some women to execute the daily work of laundry, cooking, shopping, cleaning, and viewing themselves as women on reproductive missions, they seem to need something to hold themselves superior to.
More importantly, assuming that at least some of these women had loving parents and families; it is surprising to find that few make any connection between their conceptions of motherhood and what they learned from their own family relationships. The mission of childbirth appears to be a value disconnected from their personal histories.

This book romanticizes faith. For Weisberg, orthodox practices and Godly faith give women confidence and status. Indeed, it made her feel authoritative as her husband’s rebbitzen and erased all her doubts about religious life. For most of the women in this book, however, it did not seem so simple.