

Multiply!

The birth rate in Israel is the highest of all Western countries , and women in the country are under great pressure to have many children.

What about those who do not meet this requirement?

BY MARCEL LASKUS

Jerusalem – She wants to remain anonymous because there is this shame. The shame of not being able to have as many children as she would like . It was different with her grandmother , she had twelve sons and daughters , she said she never wanted any less. In the Jewish Orthodox quarter of Jerusalem where the woman lives, they all have five , six or seven children, some more. She herself, 39 years old, an art therapist by profession, admires this abundance of children. " The beautiful thing about Israel is that we focus so much on the family , " she says in a video call. Now this ideal has been a burden for her for years .

Nine years ago she had a son and was happy : finally a child. The beginning had been made. A few years later she had a miscarriage. " I was very bad at the time. " There was the pain of having lost an unborn child. But there was also the discomfort of knowing that one child was not enough.

For people outside Israel , this may need some explanation : in Japan, for example, most families only want one child, no more. In France, many people reach the goal of so-called family planning after two children. In Germany, the Federal Statistical Office recently announced another decline : the birth rate is now only 1.35 children per woman. The situation is similar in almost all of the 38 member states of the Organisation for Economic Co -operation and

Development (OECD) ; the average value in these countries is just over 1.5 children per woman.

But one line has been running far , far above this value for decades, and quite horizontally: the line with the value for Israel .

On average, a woman here has three children in her lifetime, with the figure being even higher for religious Jews (3.9 children) and ultra-Orthodox Jews (6.2 children) . Even secular Jews , with an average of two children, have more offspring than people in the USA, where this figure has been consistently below this since 2009. Having many children is considered desirable and fulfilling in Israel. As something that is part of life , like an apartment, a job, a bed.

Those who cannot do this can be exposed to even greater mental stress in an environment with many children. " It often feels lonely , " says the woman who longs for many children.

After her miscarriage, she received help from Karen Friedman, not far from her apartment in Jerusalem. Hidden in a green courtyard , you can feel the intimacy here even from the outside . Birds chirp in the silence, treetops provide protection from the blazing sun . Over the course of a year, around 200 women seek a kind of refuge for their worries here . They find it in four bright rooms where the women can talk to each other . Eggs and sperm, painted in oil , watch them from the walls .

Karen Friedman, 65, had her first child in her early 30s, then a second, a third, and soon there were six. She definitely wanted a seventh child, " it's a Zionist thing , " she says, having lots of children is part of it. But it just didn't work out. When she had almost given up and then it finally worked, when she even gave birth to twins, her seventh and eighth, she decided that she wanted to help other women get through this difficult phase. With a friend, Kaden Harari, who is herself childless, she founded " Keren Gefen . " The response, she says, has been enormous.

Studies have shown that every eighth to tenth couple has fertility problems , meaning they cannot conceive children as they would

like . " Keren Gefen " aims to help support women in this situation. No medical examinations or interventions are carried out here, no miracles are performed. The aim is to alleviate the psychological factors that can make it difficult for women to become pregnant: stress. Sadness. Depression.

The 39-year- old , who had a miscarriage after the birth of her son and then simply couldn't get pregnant again, joined a yoga group and was there every week. She found herself and shared her experiences. It's hard to say whether it was because of yoga, but four years ago she became pregnant again and gave birth to a girl . " I 'm so grateful for that . " Two children are better than one, but not enough for her. " I would love to have more than two children. "

From a European perspective , this is difficult to imagine, as in Germany, one in five women born between 1985 and 1994 say they want to remain childless. But those who have no or few children in religious Jewish or Muslim families sometimes have " no face " in society , says Friedman. And children are present even outside of strictly religious circles . " Israel is focused on children, which makes it all the more difficult if you can't have children. "

In cafes , in restaurants, on the streets , on the beach: children's babbling is part of the background noise of Israeli society. Unlike in German pubs, it is not accepted with a rolling of the eyes; it is celebrated in Israel. On Purim, children dress up, and many holidays are aimed at children.

A woman once came to Karen Friedman and said: " Every time I hold the child in my arms as a sign of appreciation at a circumcision ceremony, the ground falls from under my feet . " Friedman replied : You don't have to go to every circumcision ceremony. No one can force you to. Take care of yourself.

Children, children, children. Daphna Birenbaum-Carmeli, a medical sociologist at the University of Haifa, is familiar with this mantra. From her professional life, but also from her private life.

She is in her early 60s and has two children, but even that has led to questions: " Why only two? "

Having many children is an ideal that is firmly anchored in Israeli society, and Birenbaum-Carmeli believes this is due to four reasons . Firstly, the Holocaust. Six million Jews were killed by the Nazis , which is why many Jews see it as their duty to restore this destroyed life, even if only quantitatively. " Having children contributes to the collective survival of the Jews , " she says. The second reason lies in the First Book of Moses. The first of the 613 commandments that a pious Jew should keep states: " Be fruitful and multiply. " And then, thirdly, there is demographics. Surrounded by predominantly Muslim states, Israel is the only country in the Middle East with a Jewish majority population . Israel itself is home to 1.9 million Arabs, who make up a fifth of the population . And if a one-state solution (which is considered completely unrealistic) were to ever come about, i.e. a construct that includes Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, Jews would probably no longer be in the majority. This is also why many people say to themselves: " We must grow as quickly as we can . "

It is still difficult to predict to what extent the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 will affect the birth rate. Karen Friedman of ".baby boom" Keren Gefen expects a As with the Holocaust , many have an urge, whether consciously or unconsciously, to counter death with life. She knows five women who became pregnant shortly after October 7. Birenbaum-Carmeli suspects the opposite effect. The uncertainty caused by the war, but also the economic situation, could lead to hesitation . For the first time in the past few months, she has heard couples talk about hesitation about having children .

And indeed , the data show that over the past seven years, the birth rate in Israel has declined slightly , among religious and non-religious Jews , but also among Christians and Muslims.

Nevertheless, it remains unprecedentedly high - also because a universal law of nature seems to have been suspended in Israel :

the wealthier people are, the fewer children they have. People pursue careers, marry later , and also think about having children later . Sometimes so late that biologically only one or two children are possible , but no longer four or five . Only in Israel does this automatism seem not to apply. Here too, people marry later , have children later - but still comparatively many. Also because medicine has to some extent adapted to the new social requirements.

On a very early Thursday morning, around 25 women are waiting in the waiting room of the Fertility Institute at Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv. Their eyes are tired because it is only seven in the morning, but their expressions also reflect anxious concern, which they try to dispel by scrolling through Instagram and Whatsapp. Will their wish to have children be fulfilled ? One door further on, the institute's director, Foad Azam, invites them into his office . He does not know how many women he has already helped . Pictures of the newborns on the walls are a reminder of the particularly complicated cases . For example, when parents almost lost their fertility due to cancer and then it worked. " I am really proud of that. "

Those who are unable to conceive a child naturally have a wide range of options in Israel to still become pregnant - and often come to Foad Azam. He and his staff carry out eight to ten artificial inseminations a day. In Israel, the attempts are paid for by the health insurance until a couple has had two children. Egg freezing is also possible , and Israel was the first country in the world to allow married couples to have their child carried by a surrogate mother.

" With aids, you can overcome almost any fertility problem ; no one has to live without children , " says Azam. Precisely because having children seems so necessary in Israel, he thinks it's a good thing that women can get so much help . And it 's his duty to help them. " It feels great . "

The 39-year- old , who had a son and finally a second child, a daughter, four years ago, continues to go to the yoga group. She feels good here. " It puts me in balance. " But she also continues to

come here because she doesn't want to stop hoping . A third child.
Maybe one day it will happen.