

WELLNESS AND MOTHERHOOD IN ISRAELI SOCIETY

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Abstract: Motherhood is something pure, soft, and full of compassion and love. However, at the same time it is also complex and challenging and creates functional and emotional difficulties that intensify in the light of the 21st century. Mothers are the most significant figures for their children and are required to have considerable mental resources. In Israeli society the mother is also challenged in the daily attempts to meet society's expectations of her. She fills many roles as a mother, breadwinner, and wife and often holds other social roles as well. Many research studies indicate the high price that mothers pay as a result of this situation, direct harm to their wellness, a price that their children also pay in the quality of the care of them. The government in Israel must address the complexity of the mother's place and act for her benefit.

Keywords: motherhood, wellness, maternal functioning, Israeli society

Motherhood and Wellness

Motherhood is something magical, natural, and sensitive to the human heart. At the same time, motherhood is composed of many conflicts and challenges that the mother must survive. In our time, the 21st century, the mother is required to function as a multi-talent and against her will in certain roles (Zimmerman, 2011).

The transformation of a woman into a mother constitutes for her a significant event in her life, which brings with it extreme changes in diverse aspects: physiological and mental changes, personal changes with the life partner, change in the daily routine, change of the perception in which the mother assumes upon herself the exclusive responsibility for her child's life, development, and personal safety. Although the event is perceived as a

positive and normative event, from the moment the child is born, many mothers experience considerable pressure, vulnerability, anxiety, and even depression (Campbell, 1981).

From the stage of birth, the child is found completely dependent on his main care-provider and learns to rely on her to provide him with a health-oriented and mental-emotional response. Research studies have found that the child's first three years constitute the critical period and have the greatest influence on his normal development. In this period, the child's brain develops rapidly and he experiences the world through the initial experiences created and shaped under the influence of his main figures – his parents and his environment. In this period, the child acquires confidence from his environment through a positive relationship with the parent and develops vital cognitive and language skills. The child's first system of relations develops, when at its basis is the communication with the main care-provider. The type and nature of the communication has impact on the child's self-development and the development of the child's ability of self-regulation. Accordingly, the child's experiences in his first years of life have a decisive influence on the shaping of his development and the shaping of his personality as an adult (Vasen-Sikron, Sher, & Ben Rabi, 2014).

Research studies have found that the first indications of mental problems are apparent already in this period. The child is found in the stage in which there is increased risk to experience neglect with severe and irreversible implications such as harm to the child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. The review of the literature indicates that being raised in an unstable emotional environment causes the development of significant difficulties in the child. When a situation is created in which the parent does not succeed in coping optimally with an event that creates a feeling of stress and anxiety, he stops being an infrastructure for an environment that enables and encourages development and a source of feelings of optimism and authentic self-expression, thus leading the child and the parent to the loss of a feeling of there being a future and horizon. The parent who is found in deficient parental functioning is pulled to a negative response as a result of the stress and the conflict that he has experienced and he does not have the ability to be emotionally and optimally available for the child before he will receive a treatment response to his feelings. The situation of stress may undermine the parent and his emotional

stability and even cause a collapse that will lead to the child's regressive functioning (Bollas, 2015).

At the same time, the concept of wellness and its importance were linked among mothers of young children. Research studies proved that the child's wellness is related to and influenced by his mother's wellness. High wellness in the mother influences the maternal functioning, which in turn has influence on the child's wellness. The conflicts the mother faces in her relationships with her children, in her relationships with her partner, in her personal development, and in her economic situation lessen her wellness and influence the child's health (Demo & Acock, 1996).

In an era of a developed Western world, where there is abundance as well as a variety of possibilities in all areas of life, the pace of changes that occur in the life of the individual and society is high and we find people dealing every day with situations of conflict that create a high incidence of feelings of pressure, uncertainty, and harm to their level of wellness (Kaplan, 2009). The State of Israel, alongside its prosperity and economic, technological and political development and other successes, has been left behind in the field of the individual's wellness in general and the mother's wellness in particular.

Being a Mother in Israeli Society

From its beginning, the State of Israel has set for itself as a goal the topic of the birthrate. Already in the year 1953, the program for the insurance of mothers was positioned as one of the initial fields of insurance in the framework of the National Insurance Law. Over the years, the government institutions have continued to encourage the birthrate through different medical services for women who seek to become pregnant and for pregnant women. However, it was found that after the women gave birth and became mothers their needs were not met (Aviv, 2012).

According to Rich (1990, in Luck Shemer, 2009), society encourages women to enter the maternal role and sanctifies its status. The new life that the mother brings into the world is immeasurably precious. The mother's value is measured in her ability to perform the task of the infant's birth successfully and her role as the "ideal mother". Rich criticizes

society that presents the maternal role as a sacred objective and addresses the difficulties that society places on women who try to combine motherhood with their growth and self-development (Rich, 1976, in Luck Shemer, 2009).

The concept of the “good of the child” constitutes an infrastructure in the welfare policy and in many intervention programs. Society presents its role as the one ultimately responsible for protecting the child’s good and thus undermines the perception of the mother’s natural and biological right. Although motherhood is presented in the public, legal, and academic space as an in-depth and sacred emotional system for the child, and even as equal between women and men, the discourse in reality in Israel and around the world directs and blames the mothers, who frequently are economically and socially disadvantaged, for parental deficiency, their situation, and their children’s situation (Herzog, 2020).

Beneficial parenting, according to educators and therapists, is parenting based on its ability to give to the child, such as love, commitment, emotional cultivation, and investment, and is perceived as an asset of considerable meaning for children and society at large. However, the reality is that the parenting itself is frequently found in situations of distress, pressure, and crisis, which weaken it and do not allow it to function beneficially. In Israel, there is a range of approaches to parenting and its status in society, to the parents themselves, and to the nature of their functioning. Society dictates the perceptions of parenting, its status and position, which change constantly, and consequently the parents feel powerless in the parental role and do not succeed in making intelligent use of the resources of giving and investing found in them (Sozkever-Cohen, 2018).

Some global research studies have indicated that although in recent decades there is a trend of rise in the improvement of the physical health of children and adults, there has also been a rise in the frequency of psychiatric disorders caused already in the first years of life. The research studies indicate consistently the many pressures associated with social changes and with the contribution of demographic characteristics (increase in the poverty indices, for example), immigration patterns, family structure (parent couple, single-parent family, same sex families), degree of involvement of the grandparents in the raising of the

children, and so on (Steele et al., 2016), alongside the parents' demanding careers, which constitute factors of stress and harm to the child's development. The Israeli Association for the Young Child maintains that in Israel these findings exist no less and perhaps even more because of the unique additional difficulties of Israel, such as security threats and extended economic and social difficulties (Erez, 2012).

The Mother's Roles in Israeli Society

Rimlet (2018), in her research study in the field of law on society's expectations from the role of motherhood, asserts that society, although it declares at every opportunity equality in all that pertains to parenting, still holds gender-based stereotypical perceptions and implicitly maintains distinction and difference between mothers and fathers in relation to the appropriate parenting functioning. The perception that exists in society is the dichotomous distinction between patterns of "good motherhood" and patterns of "bad motherhood". This differentiation forces mothers to align with the system of social expectations for their proper maternal behavior.

In Israel, mothers today fill many roles in addition to their traditional role. It is possible to find today mothers in a range of community and volunteer roles and in roles for their personal development, such as studies or different activities that require of them physical energy and tremendous resources that for the most part are not available to them and therefore lead them to high feelings of conflict and stress. The constellation of roles for women today is significantly great and diverse in contrast to the constellation of roles that mothers filled in previous generations. Therefore, today it is necessary to address all the roles that have been added to the roles of the working mother (Kulik & Liberman, 2016).

Most of the research studies that engaged in the conflict of the working mother's roles address in the mother's roles two main types of roles that cause the sense of conflict she feels: her role as a mother and her role as a worker who earns the livelihood. The filling of the family role detracts from the filling of the work role, and the roles compete with one another for the time of the working mother, who invests tremendous mental and physical efforts to fill the requirements of the different roles, which sometimes clash and conflict

with one another. The multiplicity of the roles that the working mother has today in our time period is far more complex than in the past because of the social and demographic changes that have occurred over the years. In essence, from the second half of the 20th century women have been integrated into the workplace and have thus contributed to an essential change in the roles of both women and men and to the definition of the role of the breadwinner (Styer, 2010).

The percentages of mothers who also work have increased over the years. Surveys conducted in recent years in Israel by the Central Bureau of Statistics found that the rate of employment among women aged fifteen and above is 55.7% as opposed to 64.5% among men. Among women aged 25 and up the rate of employment was 71.5% as opposed to 80% among the men in the same age group. In addition, it was found that the percentage of families in which the woman's salary was higher than that of the husband was 18.9% and the percentage of the families in which the woman's salary and the man's salary are equal was 23.1% and the percentage of the families in which the husband's salary was higher than that of the wife is 58%. Research studies further found that women constitute 65% of the workforce in the public service and 47% of the senior roles. These data were found in Israel, which is far from the countries of the European Union and the OECD, which already a decade ago began to tackle the problem, and many of them have already made meaningful strides forward to reduce the gaps in their borders (Mizrachi Simon, 2015).

The constellation of the mother's role in Israel was broadened over the years beyond her roles as a wife, mother, breadwinner, and volunteer. It is possible to find today the working mother who has additional roles in society that were created as a result of demographic, social, and technological developments of the influence of the period. For example, because of the medical technology that extends the fertility period, women can give birth in the middle of their lives when they are caring for other children and in parallel they may be grandparents of their grandchildren who sometimes are overlapping in age with their children. Sometimes there is the societal expectation that they will participate in the care of the grandchildren in order to help their children develop professionally and personally. In addition, because of the rise in the life expectancy we find the mother caring

also for her elderly parents and even for her husband's parents and being active in volunteering (Kulik & Liberman, 2016).

In addition to the mother's family, occupational, and volunteer roles, additional roles with great importance were found in the constellation of her roles. These roles have the character of the mother's self-development, for example, the acquisition of the education and a role that engages in a leisure activity. Today it is possible to find that a high rate of working women acquire a higher education in order to better integrate into the job market or in order to broaden the horizons and to develop their self-image (Home, 1998).

In today's Western world, where women are not required to give up their children if they are not married and they would seem to have the choice to go to work, reality presents a tremendous difficulty regarding women's status. In Western society and culture, the values, norms, and morality are controlled by men. Today, most of the key positions are staffed by men, and the number of women in these positions is negligible. For example, only 15%-16% of all the senior managers in the United States are women. It was found that the lack of women in senior roles derives from the culture of global work in which the rewards go to the workers who are found in the office until the late hours of the night and do not take vacation in order to take care of an ill child. This situation causes women ahead of time not to choose to work in senior roles. Women from the beginning give up on the race to reach the top and prefer to invest in the raising of their children, and thus they are accused frequently of non-feminist attitudes and support of the inequality between women and men. In addition, women become mothers at a later age, but the career world does not take into consideration the changes of the time period and force the mothers to choose what is more important to them, the values of society and culture or their children. In every choice that the mother makes she has feelings of guilt in the context of the other role and according to the deceptive expectations of society. In the male work world, the work hours exceed all logic and there is a demand to be accessible at any hour and in any place, thus causing stress and conflict. The absence from work because of a child's graduation party or any 'family' reason is not legitimate. These values of work were assimilated deeply in Western society, which has made sacred a culture of marathon work as well as lengthy

hours of work in the office. In this situation, not only do the mothers lose and are harmed but also the men lose their connection to the family circle and the compassionate aspects of the care of their children. In essence, society at large is harmed and loses from the adoption of these values (Slughter, 2012).

Mor-Sela (2012) raises the assertion that Israeli society sets parameters for the role of the good mother. The mothers are in the race for the achievement of the unrealistic parameters, and therefore they feel constantly the lack of perfection and guilt. The mother's status is central and esteemed in society but society does not encourage and support mothers and parenting. According to Mor-Sela, the role of motherhood is transparent in society.

The intervention programs in the United States illustrate the conflict and the trap that society presents to the mother and perpetuate the myth of the 'bad mother' for the self-fulfilling prophecy in which the mother is considered a 'bad mother' if she works and thus is colored by society as breaking the expectation from her to fulfill her patriarchal role in the natural place of the home and is accused of preferring her income and neglecting her children. The mother is also considered a 'bad mother' if she does not work and thus she 'lives at the expense of the state' and is blamed for its shaky situation. In this situation, society creates situations of stress and conflict for the mother and harms her mental health (in Herzog, 2020).

Mirachor (2012) maintains that from a young age the manner of the raising of the girls is different from that of the boys. The woman is raised into the expectation that society assimilates a high order of priority to become a mother and the manner of the roles expected of her. During the woman's life, she assimilates the expectations and creates a picture different from the existing reality. After the first birth, alongside the mother's great excitement and optimal expectation for the continuation, the mother faces a reality completely different from what she expected, a reality in which the mother's role presents her with more than a few tasks and challenges. Wellness and tranquility do not find a place in the description of the new reality and are not addressed by society. The mothers aspire consistently to a maternal totality, in which they put motherhood at the top of their

priorities. The infant's needs are at a far higher place than their needs. In the first stages of the development, this is a natural process that accompanies the infant in his entrance in to the world, adjustment, and development. This order of priorities is correct for the infant and fulfills his needs, but the time in which the border blurs and the totality of motherhood continues and frequently surpasses the mother's needs constitutes a factor for the development of a sense of stress and feeling of being closed and isolated. The myth of the "good mother" and the ideology of the "child at the center" are assimilated into Western society and require the mother to see first to the child's needs.

Research studies have found that in Israel there are 180 thousand births a year, and 15% of the mothers develop disorders in their mood and anxieties during the pregnancy and after the birth. The described phenomena include a poor mood, lack of ability to experience joy, symptoms of anxiety, sudden crying fits, sleeping difficulties, bothersome thoughts, decline in the functioning, difficulties concentrating, and sometimes even suicidal thoughts and suicide. These phenomena lead to communication difficulties for the infant and cause difficulties with his care. In other words, the phenomena not only harm the mother's wellness but also have significant influence on the child's health and optimal development. Accordingly, many research studies indicate the relationship between the mother's depression and the child's developmental delay and even a higher than the mean incidence of psychiatric and behavioral disorders in the child (Aviv, 2019).

It was found that more than 70% of the women who reported that they experienced emotional difficulty conceal their emotions from those around them. The phenomena of emotional difficulties that the mother experienced are not spoken of in public discourse and thus many are not aware of their existence. Many women do not receive an appropriate solution and are harmed because of their situation, as are their children, their spouses, and society at large that is influenced by this (Aviv, 2019).

The research literature of recent years sees a place for the greater reference to the surrender of the self and the mother's feeling that accompanies the mother's entry into the motherhood role – the surrender and loss of autonomy and time, identity, friends, pattern of the couple relationship, femininity, sexuality, body, and loss of the professional identity.

The experience of surrender, which women feel when they enter motherhood, is within the existing social and cultural dictates and reality. The meaning is that the social norms are such that they in essence shape the experience of surrender (Luck Shemer, 2009).

The decision makers in Israeli society must stop for a moment in order to think about the situation of the mother in Israel, to research about her needs and place, and to provide a solution for the promotion of her wellness. This is a critical issue for the growth of a health generation of children and is no less important than the other issues of the State.

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