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How should we view unmarried pregnant women?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

My first inclination, when faced with this article's question, was to offer an impatient response, "Why is this question even being asked?! We should greet all pregnant women, regardless of their marital status, with love and support."

A more nuanced, but equally brief answer is: "It depends on the woman. Pregnancy may be planned for or accidental. Independent of intention, a woman who learns that she is pregnant may react with any combination of excitement, joy, hope, apprehension, ambivalence, anxiety, fear, and confusion. Our response needs to match hers. But whether we respond with shared enthusiasm or shared worry, tears of joy or cautious optimism, one thing should still be constant, our love and support."

Now for a bit longer answer. With the emergence of the Enlightenment and the development of modern science, many old rules and cherished truths have been revised if not discarded altogether. Most notably, women, who previously had been considered property, first of their fathers, and then of their husbands, became empowered and enfranchised. Slowly but surely, with much work still to be done, women have gained the rights to education, to owning property, to having a voice in society. A pinnacle of this transformation will be truly realized when a lesbian couple can sanctify their partnership as a bona fide marriage with all the benefits and dignity afforded to it by the state as anyone else's marriage.

Women, today, can achieve financial security without depending on a partner or spouse. They can choose to marry or not to marry, to partner or not to partner. They can choose to make a career and also have children. And they can also choose to have children or not to have children with or without the prerequisite of marriage or committed partnership. As Humanistic Jews, we support these new-found freedoms.

Women, today, have especially gained control over their own bodies. They can prevent pregnancy by taking charge of birth control or by choosing an abortion. They can also take charge of getting pregnant without a partner. Whether they are lesbian women who long to have children or single straight women who have the same yearning, modern science has made it possible for them to conceive a child with the aid of sperm donation. These mothers of choice, as they are known, have a remarkable opportunity their foremothers could not have imagined. No less fortunate are any couples facing infertility difficulties that can now be overcome with the gift of modern medicine.

As Humanistic Jews, in keeping with our philosophy generally, we do not resist change but welcome the innovations of modernity, even when they challenge our accepted notions and comfort level. Among these changes, the definition of family has evolved most dramatically. Whether as a result of divorce or teenage pregnancy, there have always been single parents. Now, there are single parents by choice. Some choose to make a family through adoption, others by getting pregnant. Regardless of the means, the ends are the same. What counts is giving all these new children love and support – and the same for their parents!

How fortunate all of us are to live in an era when these gains are being achieved in our own lifetime – history, here, is not looking at the past but is unfolding right in front of us.

Rabbi Peter Schweitzer presents a view of Humanistic Judaism as a regular contributor to Moment Magazine's "Ask the Rabbis" column. The response printed here may be slightly altered from the version that first appeared in the magazine. You can find Moment Magazine on-line at www.momentmag.com.