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Ethics
Sigi Ziering

This year, our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of parenting. Each month, an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with what Jewish texts and our interpretive tradition teach us about the multidimensional understandings of family and the ethical questions that are raised as parents take on parenting with serious reflection. This column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series and responses.

Rabbi Michael Balinsky is executive vice president of the Chicago Board of Rabbis. He was a Hillel director for 22 years and director of faculty development for the Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning in Chicago. Laurie S. Zoloth assisted with the scientific descriptions in this article. Zoloth is a professor of medical ethics and humanities and director of the Center for Bioethics, Science and Society at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine.

A Jewish Argument for 'Savior Siblings'

MICHAEL BALINSKY

As medical research and medical technology advance, inevitably difficult ethical questions will emerge. Like all serious ethical questions, medical issues do not present clear choices between right and wrong, but rather demand that we address competing commitments between two rights or two "goods."

How do we approach what has been called "savior siblings"? Here is an important ethical dilemma: A family has a child with a rare genetic disease. Medical research has enabled treatment of that condition (usually one in which the child's body cannot make a particular enzyme) by transplanting bone marrow from a perfectly matched donor to replace the damaged tissue in the ill child. Using tissue typing in conjunction with pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, doctors can pick a human embryo with the precise genetic match for implantation. If all goes well, the newborn will become a "savior sibling," a brother or sister capable of donating life-saving tissue to an existing child.

Critics of "savior siblings" have argued that it is unethical to create a child who has been brought into this world as a commodity rather than as a person. Related to this criticism is the fear that if genetic selection is used to pick a donor match, that technology could lead to people conceiving, with technological help, designer babies — children who fit into some predetermined genetic template.

There is, of course, validity to these arguments and fears. An argument about the slippery slope of genetic engineering should be taken seriously. Adequate safeguards need

to be in place as we gain mastery over the reproductive process, and such mastery, or attempts at mastery, need to be carefully thought through. As human beings created in the divine image, it would be immoral not to appreciate each life on its own terms and not to see each as a wondrous creation rather than as something ordered at a store to our specifications.

While this issue raises certain ethical fears, three competing arguments support the choice of conceiving a "savior" child.

First, people have children for many reasons. We do not require people to state their motivation for procreation, which in Jewish tradition is a mitzvah. Some reasons may be lofty, moral, spiritual ones; others may be as simple as having a sibling so one's first child will have someone with whom to play. In choosing to have a second or third child, parents often consider how the baby will enhance or even complicate the life of the family. "The pain of raising children," as it is sometimes called in Jewish tradition, does not mean that the child will not be nurtured or loved by the parent. How the child is raised is the primary moral concern, not the intention of conception.

Second, while the slippery-slope argument should not be discarded, it is not an immediate concern. While we are capable of doing genetic matching, manipulating the human genome to achieve a desired end is not at this time possible. Third, and most important, a sibling "savior" is conceived to do one of the most moral mitzvot in Jewish tradition: saving the life of another. When a life can be saved, the imperative of "not standing idly by the blood of your neighbor"

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Sh'ma invites a plurality of voices to engage with matters critical to contemporary Judaism. We aim to inspire Jews and fellow travelers to think deeply, act responsibly, and better our communities.

Who are Sh'ma Readers?

“They are deeply committed to Jewish tradition and Jewish continuity; spiritually curious and at times adventurous; at home, at least to some extent, with the world of Jewish texts and the texture of Jewish rituals; appreciative of the many genuine intellectual, ethical, and political benefits of secular modernity though not unaware of its fraught relationship with Jewish life; people for whom their Jewish identity is a vital component in an ongoing process of self-creation and expression by the light of their understanding of morals, community, and spirituality, a process they share with other families of humanity, and with concerned individuals everywhere.”

Yehudah Mirsky, Schusterman Center for Israel Studies, Brandeis University

Our Vision


Each month, *Sh'ma* creates a “conversation” in print, digital, and online forms that bring together an array of voices around a single theme. These voices cross the spectrum of Judaism — secular and religious, communal and non-partisan, engaged and striving — and expose readers to challenging, sometimes conflicting ideas. We are guided in this approach by the wisdom of *elu v' elu*, both these and also these are the words of God. We raise relevant questions thoughtfully and wrestle lovingly with Jewish concerns as we attempt to navigate the intellectual, communal, and spiritual challenges of contemporary Judaism. Our focus is on ideas — their complexity and range, and how they inform action. *Sh'ma* hosts intelligent and creative conversations that reside outside of any particular institution. Our readers turn to *Sh'ma* to find what they cannot find elsewhere — concise, accessible, informative, and intelligent discussion and argumentation. At the intersection of tradition and change, *Sh'ma* helps readers confront modernity with a deep respect for Jewish values and accumulated wisdom, bringing to bear the richness of Jewish sources, texts, philosophy, and experience.

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must take precedence over policy concerns. This is not to silence the concerns or the critics, but rather to prevent the loss of a life while the debaters argue their positions. To my knowledge, no written responsa in Orthodox circles on this specific question have been offered yet. In Israel, though, ethics committees have favorably reviewed the procedure and it has happened under rabbinic supervision, thus making it a pragmatic and reasonable course of action for parents. 

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what makes good business sense also makes sense for the planet and its people. Israel's commitment to “smart” solutions that integrate data and technology, not just as implements on the field, but also as tools for planning and strategy, would be invaluable in China, where resource efficiency is not just a mode of survival, but also a strategy with long threads in Chinese culture. Moreover, the practical (“*tachlis*”) approach of Israelis means that not all solutions are high-tech and expensive. Rather, approaches that would merely require a shift in systems thinking, such as no-tillage or drip irrigation, are seen as cost-appropriate for a country with a huge disparity of wealth between the urban and the rural, farming poor.

Nonetheless, Israeli companies face a distinct set of challenges in entering China. As they attempt to navigate the world's largest agricultural producer, they will need to bring focused business strategies that are nimble and able to accommodate China's cultural, business, and political norms. If Israeli companies don't adequately prepare, research, and conduct due diligence, they will face off against brutal negotiating partners and become lost in the chaos and noise of a booming marketplace.

Sustainability in agriculture is no longer the pipe dream of a group of outlier activists: it is integral to growing food — assuming that we all wish for an adequate supply of food for the human community for generations to come. Now that China has recognized it must minimize pollution, reduce the use of natural resources, and continue to ensure high yields of safe and healthy food, a massive modern agriculture market is emerging for great technologies from abroad. Many of these technologies were initially designed and developed in Israel. 

Discussion Guide

1. How does a growing trade relationship between Israel and China serve both countries as well as the United States?
2. Why are the Chinese so enamored of Jews and Jewish tradition? What complicates that interest? How do “memory” and “truth” link the two civilizations?
3. Is there a role for China to play in the Middle East? What role might that be? How will China's emergence as a Middle East player impact Israel?
4. What ethical questions are raised for Jews buying goods made in China? How do we determine whether it is better to engage with China or to isolate China?
5. Are Jews a “light unto the nations”? And if so, how does that inform our dealings with others?