Dear Reader,

For too long, the Jewish community has been silent and helpless in the face of the timeless problem of infertility. We can only make change, bring healing, and provide support for issues that we identify, name and address. You are part of a growing movement to remove the stigma and isolation that so many people dealing with infertility have to face.

Infertility is a human issue. However, being Jewish brings a unique perspective to the experience as well as unique possibilities for guidance for getting through it. In conjunction with Infertility Awareness Shabbat, the goal of this resource is to give infertility a voice and hold space for the 1 in 8 men and women within their spiritual communities.

This guide is not mean to be prescriptive. There is no one way and no right way to deal with infertility. Each person has to deal with their circumstances, make decisions, and feel their feelings in the moment, in their own way. This guide is meant to help people to move through the experience and to feel less isolated. It is also intended to build sensitivity and support within the Jewish community. Not every piece in this resource guide will speak to each person. Our hope is that by addressing a variety of experiences and perspectives that this will include something for everyone.

Thank you for your part in bringing awareness to infertility in the Jewish community and if you are experiencing a family building challenges yourself, we hope you find comfort and support from this resource guide.

B'vracha,

Idit Solomon
Hasidah
Hasidah.org

Elana Frank
Jewish Fertility Foundation
JewishFertilityFoundation.org

Gila Muskin Block
Yesh Tikva
YeshTikva.org

HASIDAH חסידה

JEWISH FERTILITY FOUNDATION Atlanta

yeshTIKVA HOPE
Supporting Jewish People Facing Infertility

The Many Voices of Infertility: Passover and All Year

Pesach 5779 - April 8, 2019

Table of Contents

Rosh Hashanah Morning Ritual

By: Rabbi Peter S. Berg, Atlanta, GA

Each year on Rosh Hashanah morning, for at least twenty years, The Temple has participated in a ritual that is a highlight of the year. At the conclusion of *seder tekiyat hashofar*, one of our rabbi reads the names of all the babies born in the past year. This came into being because people noticed that the only names we read publically were for healing and *yartzeit* – and we wanted to read names in a joyful manner as well, especially at the New Year.

Five years ago, it occurred to us that reading the names of new babies could also be painful for those in our community struggling with infertility. As such, we decided to use this opportunity to acknowledge the pain of infertility and let our members know that we see them and pray with them. After the recitation of babies born in the previous year, we now recite the following prayer:

As we welcome these beautiful new babies into their homes
and our congregation,
let us also remember that one out of every six Jewish couples – struggles with infertility.

There are, often invisible, members of our community, who are this year, shouldering that burden themselves – including the sadness, depression, and financial stress.

Let us, this year, be cognizant of them – and remember that 1 out of every 6 couples trying to conceive –
is having tremendous difficulty.

Eternal God, let this month – the beginning of the New Year -
be the month of conception for all of those who are struggling. Amen.

Reciting this brief prayer has been life-changing for us. Often, we can hear an audible reaction of gratitude in the congregation. Each year, after the service, numerous individuals approach our clergy to thank us for "seeing them". Additionally, several couples share with us their fertility challenges. It's not uncommon to hear "We didn't think to approach our rabbi, but we are really struggling and could use your help". This ritual also provides the opportunity to make referrals to the Jewish Fertility Foundation of Atlanta. Certainly, this type of prayer can be adapted to all of our holy days. It is incumbent upon clergy and congregations to open their hearts to countless members, often invisible, who are suffering and struggling with infertility and related challenges.

Answering Prayer

By: Rabbi Rachel Marder South Orange, NJ

There once was a woman who desperately wanted to have a baby, but she and her husband struggled to conceive. Her husband didn't understand her suffering. He loved his wife deeply and believed they could lead full lives just the two of them. "Why are you crying?" he would ask her. "I love you. Aren't you happy with me?" As the years passed, the woman grew lonely. She felt isolated from her husband and from the outside world. She felt forgotten by God. It became difficult for her to leave her home. Everywhere she went it seemed she saw babies in strollers and happy families. She yearned for the love and joy of bringing children into the world. Why had God not blessed her as He had other women? She felt incomplete.

One night after dinner the woman rose from the table and went to find her local shul. She didn't know what had come over her, but for some reason she felt an urge to pray. She arrived at the synagogue. It was dark and quiet inside. She approached the ark and fell to her knees. With her face buried in her hands, the woman began to weep. Then she looked up and cried out to God. She didn't know if Anyone was listening, but that didn't matter. As her tears poured out, so did her pain; all the doctors' visits, the endless fertility treatments, the exhaustion and isolation, the despair when nothing seemed to work. Between desperate sobs she took to bargaining. "If you will remember me, God," she whispered, "if you will allow me to have a baby, I will dedicate my child to You. My child's life will be about service and gratitude to You." At that moment, she felt hopeful that God would hear her plea. Suddenly the woman felt a tap on her shoulder. It was the rabbi. He didn't understand what this strange woman was doing alone in the dark in the shul. "Are you drunk, miss?" he asked accusingly. "No, no!" the woman said, wiping her tears and jumping to her feet. "I'm praying." The rabbi felt embarrassed for misjudging her heartfelt prayer, and apologized. "May God grant you what you have asked," he said. And as the woman turned to leave, for the first time in a long while she felt better.

This story may sound familiar. It's the tale of Hannah and the high priest Eli at the sanctuary of Shilo in Ancient Israel, from Samuel 1. Hannah's story is shared by many couples and individuals today, including, I'm sure, some of you reading this. About 1 in 8 couples in the United States who would like to have children face the challenge of infertility. I bring Hannah's story this morning because today congregations across the country are observing Infertility Awareness Shabbat. Yesh Tikva, an organization whose name means "There is Hope," encourages all of us to remember the story of Hannah on this Shabbat, and to honor the struggle of couples we may know; to listen with sensitivity, offer support, and lessen their loneliness.

I also bring the story of Hannah this morning to explore what she can teach us about prayer. Hannah's story is significant not only because many of us resonate with her struggle, but also because in our tradition, Hannah became the model for how a Jew should pray. The Sages of the Talmud identify Hannah's whispered, personal plea as the highest form of prayer. This is surprising, as the Sages also developed the highly structured Amidah prayer, with its fixed wording and standardized choreography. But they are very concerned with kavannah, the

intentionality and personal focus we bring to prayer, and Hannah exemplifies this. She opens herself to God; she prays spontaneously, from the heart; she is fully present. It's interesting to note that in this story Eli the priest, the representative of institutional religion, does not understand Hannah. He doesn't grasp what she's doing; he can only imagine that she's drunk or disturbed. That's because Hannah's prayer is bigger than religion. It breaks the rules of structure and decorum. Hannah does not recite traditional words by rote; she offers her own words -- honest, anguished, deeply human. This, our Sages said, is the most authentic way to come before God.

Before our Sages taught the value of connecting with God through offering t'fillat halev, the prayer of our hearts, the ancient Israelites offered God animal and grain sacrifices in a highly structured system we read about in parashat Vayikra. In the wilderness they offer sacrifices in the mishkan, the portable worship space in the desert; later, they offered their sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem. But even before the Temple was destroyed, some ancient prophets challenged the sacrificial system as a way of connecting with God.

"We shall offer the words of our lips instead of calves," said Hosea in the 8th century BCE (Hosea 14:3). And the speaker in Psalm 55 says: "In the evening, morning, and afternoon I will speak and cry aloud, and God will hear my voice" (Psalms 55:18). Already in ancient Israel, some religious visionaries realized that a practice of offering one's own words to God makes possible a spirituality that is inward, personal, individual -- something the sacrificial system lacks. In the Temple, spiritual practice was highly prescribed -- fixed, formal, communal and vicarious -- the priest carried out the ritual for the individual worshiper. But when the Temple was destroyed, a new model emerged. For the Sages who reinvented Jewish spiritual practice after the destruction, the words of our heart become crucial in reaching for God. Highly structured communal ritual, devoid of the individual voice, is not enough anymore.

Jewish prayer in our own time is about striking a balance between communal structure and individual need; between the fixed words of the prayer book, recited together at set times, and sharing one's deepest, most personal feelings with God. Some of us feel pretty good at one of these, and it's hard to achieve both every time we pray, but both dimensions of prayer are valuable. Honoring our fixed times for worship ensures that we will show up to pray regularly, and not just on those rare occasions when we may feel like it. Praying and singing the traditional words in community allows us to provide support to one another, and reminds us that we're part of something greater than ourselves.

But if we only pray when and how we are commanded to, the experience can sometimes feel scripted or empty. So our Sages remind us to ask ourselves a question, every time we pray: What do I need to say to God right now that is not written in the siddur? They insist that our own voice, our own thoughts and emotions, are essential to prayer. Without this kind of deep personal engagement, prayer is incomplete. Said the medieval sage Bahya ibn Pakuda: "Prayer without kavannah is like a body without a soul." It is an empty vessel.

Hannah's kavannah is only one reason why she is a Jewish model of prayer. I believe she has something deeper to teach us. Hannah was feeling desperate when she prayed to God for a child. She did not know whether God would hear her and grant what she asked for. She had waited for years; maybe she had tried to pray in the past, and the words had not come or she felt ignored. Still, she took a chance. She kept her heart open. Hannah's story teaches us that prayer is an expression of profound hope. When the enslaved Israelites cried out to God in Egypt, they did not know whether God would answer them. We pray to remind ourselves that the world can change, our circumstances can change, and we ourselves can change. Prayer is optimistic. One who prays says: what is now, need not always be. The world can get better, and so can we.

Prayer is also humbling. We offer up our dreams, and admit that we alone cannot bring them to fruition. We need God and our community to hope and act with us. The Talmud's recommended prayer stance captures this dual posture of hope and humility: Einav l'mata v'libo l'mala. "One should cast one's eyes downward as though looking at the ground and one's heart upward as though standing in heaven" (Yevamot 105b).

I would suggest another direction to look while we pray: at ourselves. I agree with Rabbi Harold Schulweis, who taught, "There is nothing that we can rightly pray for that does not make demands on us." We ask God for a peaceful world, a rebuilt Jerusalem, for rain, for good health and for healing. In so doing, says Rabbi Schulweis, we should also ask ourselves: How am I making the world more peaceful? What am I doing for Jerusalem and Israel? How am I caring for the environment? How am I guarding my health? What am I doing to bring comfort to those in my life who are in need of healing? When we ask God to be compassionate and to open His hand to us, we might ask: do I show compassion? In what ways am I giving to others? The 19th century German Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch taught that "l'hitpalel," the Hebrew word that means "to pray," should be understood as a reflexive verb. Prayer should motivate us to look at our own life, examine our deeds, and commit to change. The hope we express in prayer should also be about our own potential to grow and improve .

The Talmud tells us that the first century Sage Rabbi Eliezer would give money to a poor person before he turned to God in prayer (B. Bava Batra 10a). How could he ask God to care for humanity if he was not doing his part? Rabbi Eliezer's practice reminds me that we are partners with God in an everlasting covenant to care for the world. The Talmud cites a verse in Psalms to support Rabbi Eliezer's custom: "Ani b'tzedek echazeh panecha -- Through righteousness, I will behold Your face" (Psalms 17:15), meaning, I encounter God when I engage in acts of tzedek, justice and righteousness. This is the work that God and people do together. For Rabbi Eliezer, the act of prayer -- standing before God and making requests -- obligated him to make those same demands on himself and to care for others. If Hannah teaches us that prayer is an act of hope, Rabbi Eliezer teaches us that prayer should motivate us to work in partnership with God. Finally, Hannah's story teaches us how people can answer each other's prayers. What gave Hannah comfort? When did she feel better? It was not while she was praying. Hannah is comforted after Eli the priest joins her in her prayer. After his initial misunderstanding, Eli offers Hannah understanding and support -- he tells Hannah to go in peace and prays that her prayer

will be answered. At that moment, says the Bible, U'faneha lo hayu la od (1 Samuel 1:18) -- literally her face was no more, an idiom that means her countenance had changed and she was no longer downcast. Hannah was not yet pregnant, but she received a different kind of healing. Eli saw Hannah's suffering and offered her empathy. He linked his hope with her hope, and because of that she was comforted.

I believe that God was acting through Eli, and that we, like Eli, are instruments for God's healing in the world. Eli is a fallible human being. He makes mistakes. He is not God. But he, and all of us, are God's agents in offering comfort and strength to one another. When I pray with my community I can see who is saying Kaddish and feeling loss, who has a loved one who is ill, who is celebrating a simcha, and who just survived a life-threatening incident. We can learn a lot about people by praying with them, and we can then respond to them. We can pray for one another, link our hopes and dreams together, and show each other kindness and empathy. Often we cannot solve the problems that our friends and fellow congregants are facing, but we can ease their isolation and answer their prayers in our own way. As Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman said, "Prayer cannot mend a broken bridge, rebuild a ruined city, or bring water to parched fields. Prayer can mend a broken heart, lift up a discouraged soul, and strengthen a weakened will."

Unlike other conditions, when someone is struggling with infertility, we cannot usually see it. But we as a community can listen with sensitivity and refrain from asking insensitive questions about when a couple will have children.

The frustration of the infertile couple is a microcosm of our own frustration at being tongue-tied before God. And the relief a couple feels when the community reaches out to offer support reflects a community's ability to find prayer together.

Cook Until Ready

By: Brian Ross Los Angeles, CA

“Well, they cooked a long time.” That’s what I often quip when someone compliments one of our three daughters, now ages 14,16 and 18. Technically, of course, it’s not true. But emotionally it certainly is. That 18-year-old took over eleven years before we were finally able to welcome her to the world. She wasn’t our first pregnancy, though. She was preceded by numerous others that we kept losing, somewhere between four and seventeen weeks. Doctors, both western and eastern, told us that miscarriage was the least understood area of infertility, but there was nothing “wrong” with us, so just hang in there, and one of them would “stick”. That was encouraging, but not easy. We tried every legitimate therapy but still kept losing those glorious, tiny little heartbeats while our friends and family were happily progenating. That was the bad news. The good news was, that gave us lots of time to practice. We became “Uncle” and “Aunt” to many of those kids, and remain so to this day. We got to see parenting strategies work and fail. We saw families blossom and families wither. Neither of us recalls being jealous. It was more mystification – we were good people, we thought, trying to live good lives and do things right. If God’s promise to Abraham was that the Jewish People would be as numerous “k’cochvei haShamayim”, as the stars of the heavens, then where was our little piece of that? As we look back, we now see with clarity that we became much better parents that we would ever have been back then. A good friend once told me that God has only three answers: “Yes,” “Not now,” or “I have something better in mind.” God has a plan, and for whatever His reasons, it just wasn’t our time. And when it finally, finally was our time, and that little heartbeat passed six weeks and seventeen and twenty-five and then emerged... we named her Cohava: star.

Grandparent Perspective

By: Jeanine Bekerman Atlanta, GA

I struggled through delivering a stillborn baby boy as a young mother. I had a very close group of friends that were due right around the same time as me. Suddenly, I was a pariah, and although these friends tried everything they could, I couldn't be around them. We escaped, with our almost three year old to Israel to heal physically and to recuperate. Well, my sister-in-law was due the same month as me. There is the picture of her smiling with a huge belly and me beside her. This was in 1982, and it still brings tears to my eyes.

People do not intentionally mean to hurt us. They think they are helping us. I followed the Jewish tradition of not preparing my house for a baby until the baby is born. At least I didn't have to come home to that. But going to the grocery store and hearing over and over again - So what did you have? This lasted for months and was more than I could handle. I really had no one to talk to when it happened and I avoided my friends. Thankfully those women continued to remain by my side and are still some of my closest friends today.

Now, I have watched my child suffering with infertility for the past ten years. As with other grandmothers to be, I felt helpless, my arms ached to hold her and make it all better. We have to live with the fact that we cannot take a bandaid and fix this. We can take our feelings and multiply them a thousand times, and we still won't know the suffering our children are going through. What is it like to sit at the Passover table with siblings and cousins either pregnant, or holding their babies? I've seen my guests look at my struggling child with sadness and my daughter, although broken inside, try to smile.

How can we help our grandmothers understand the journey called infertility? Your child's body becomes a science project and her emotions and those of her spouse, are hard to perceive. The years of torture, the losses, the attempts at conception all while trying to lead a normal life. However, if an attempt fails, we have to watch our children go back to square one and try again.

We as the grandparents worry. How do my son and daughter, daughter and son, survive this emotionally, financially, spiritually? We are lucky in Atlanta where we have the Jewish Fertility Foundation to assist with workshops, mentoring, buddying and financially helping the couple attempt to conceive. We grandparents can be educated in how to be with our children in a positive, nurturing way. If we as grandparents are taught what infertility means, we can stand up with our children as they take this personal journey. We can advocate for them while learning to be listeners and have compassionate shoulders to cry on (and refrain from listing what we think needs to be done). We can shed tears with our children while remaining strong as their support system.

We were blessed with two more children of our own after our loss. You don't have to give up, keep going until you get yourselves heard and understood. You are not alone.

Holiday Emotions

By: Avigayil Schreiber New York, NY

The holidays are always a stressful time when you and your husband are from different places. Both sets of parents want you to visit. Grandparents want to see you and catch up on what you are doing in life. Friends are visiting and you want to reminisce about the good old days. What no one thinks about, are all the couples going through infertility and how much harder these times are for them.

Suddenly when you go to visit your family, your sister in law is shoving her new baby in your face. She doesn't realize that you are about to start your first round of IVF and are more nervous than you were on your first day of college. The family friend in shul who asks why you haven't had kids yet, thinks he is just joking around with you – really you just lost another $20,000 to medications, surgical procedures, and ultrasounds. One Chag you cannot go away because you might have a transfer on the first day of the holiday. You don't go to shul for the first two days because you had just gotten a phone call that none of your eggs fertilized less than 12 hours before candle-lighting. When you pull yourself out of bed and make it to shul on the third day someone says, "wow it must be nice to not have kids and be able to sleep in everyday!"

No one is trying to be malicious. No one is trying to throw it in your face that you have no kids. But so many of our holidays are centered around families and children. On Pesach right at the beginning of the Seder with the MaNishtana, on Simchat Torah with Kol Hanearim, even Yom Kippur when it is customary for parents to say a special prayer for their children, we are left empty handed.

The most special feeling is when that amazing miracle of a child is finally given to you, and suddenly you are able to take part in all of these customs. This past year watching my husband hold our daughter as he was honored with the Aliyah of Kol Hanearim right before which the Rabbi said the prayer for couples struggling with infertility, brought everything full circle. We were finally able to enjoy watching all the bright little faces as they got their Aliyah all together. But it is hard to not think about the future, and for us to build our family we will have to do it all again. For now, we try to live in the moment. Try not to read into the comments and the actions. But it is hard. Tears are very frequently shed. Feelings are hurt. No one is perfect. But hopefully we will able to push through this journey, and be able to share in these traditions together.

How Do You Share The Story?

By: Aron Wolgel Berkeley, CA

The excitement of Pesach is upon us! Many families are preparing for their seder, planning menus, arranging place settings, and studying texts that will help unlock new understandings of the traditional tale. Guided by the Haggadah, we are told -
הרי זה משובח, כל המרבה בסיפור יציאת מצרים.- anyone who expands the telling of the exodus from Egypt is praiseworthy ,

Many scholars have pointed out that the magid section actually contains four separate stories of yetziat mitzrayim - the Exodus from Egypt. During the Seder, we put these stories together so that we all participate in one unified narrative.

As such, here are four stories of infertility, thematically linked to four of the items on the seder plate: maror, charoset, karpas, and zeroa.

Maror - the bitter story

As with any difficulty in life, this journey carried with it bitter moments that overwhelmed the other aspects of life, often creating a sense of despair.

It began when the doctor explained that our situation was “not optimal.” After discovering that IVF was our only real hope for conceiving, we were extremely optimistic going into our first transfer. Then it failed. Then the second transfer failed. And the third. We felt a deep sense of loss, even though we hadn’t technically lost anything.

Were this the full story, it would have been bitter enough. But throughout the entire ordeal, we also overcame painful social interactions that presented themselves:

I endured the “playful” comments from community members when they observed me holding a friend's child and would remark “that looks good on you.” Exercising restraint, I’d politely smile back, and think to myself, “It's a baby, not a sweater!”

In fact, the deepest hurt existed at others’ celebrations. I can still remember the sting of people wishing me “soon by you” at every bris and baby naming. In my best attempt at empathy, I would reply “today is about their family”, so that I wouldn’t have to think of (the incompleteness of) mine.

Charoset - the bricks and mortar

The charoset reminds us of the mortar used by the Israelites in building Pharaoh's cities. For our story, the charoset represents the tasks that simply had to get done.

I was challenged by how difficult this chapter was for my wife - her desire to be a mother was at the core of her identity. As such, I became the "logistics manager" in order to enable her to address her emotions in a more focused way, unencumbered by the extracurricular demands.

I appreciated the responsibility of scheduling doctors' appointments. I found meaning in mixing the medicines for her nightly injections – it was my contribution to the process. Most notably, I felt like a partner in sharing my wife's burden. By taking care of the details, I allowed her to free up the necessary headspace to deal with her emotions.

Karpas - the story of hope

On Pesach, many people have the custom of using a green vegetable, symbolizing spring, as their Karpas.

Fittingly, it seemed as though every time we found another glimmer of hope, (e.g. another embryo transfer) it felt that our parsley would be doused in salt water. The hope had been engulfed in sorrow. It was tricky to maintain my optimism, but I recognized how essential it was. I quickly learned that humor (albeit wry at times) would be my default coping mechanism.

At key moments, we clung to hope. Other times, I found it more helpful to seek respite. Sometimes the best feeling came from playing in my weekly frisbee game. For those 2 hours, I was able to escape my doubts and fears. For a brief time, I could release myself from the pressures of the home and remember the larger scenery of life – joking with friends, enjoying the outdoors, and appreciating all that I was physically capable of.

By providing a break, these moments of respite allowed me to return to my situation with a renewed sense of hope.

Zeroa - the story of strength

In the Bible, Israel is led out of Egypt with an outstretched arm. Consequently, the shank bone is associated with strength, or in this case, support.

We found ourselves continually reframing our situation to express gratitude for what we had. We were fortunate to have family and friends who supported us with outstretched arms. Though I occasionally reached out to friends to unload my burden, the most important idea for me during this time was to stay close to my wife.

We prioritized time for each other and found strength in three phrases, which became our mantra: "1) I love you. 2) We'll get through this together. 3) This will eventually be resolved." Now, I didn't know what "resolved" would look like, or how long things would take before they were resolved, but as long as #1 and #2 stayed strong, it gave us hope for #3.

The Many Voices of Infertility: Passover and All Year

Each person's Passover seder connection revolves around a different aspect of the day - songs, rituals, community, and in many cases, the food. Regardless of the personal association, our seder reflects a mixture of experiences. This is how we remember the slavery while simultaneously celebrating freedom.

It's important to recognize when to immerse ourselves in one perspective of the story. By the same token, if we fail to engage in the other narratives, our story is not authentic. Similarly, my personal "yetziat mitzrayim" taught me to embrace all of the stories and flow between them.

We spend so much time and effort trying to create the world as it ***should*** be; this experience has taught me the importance of living in the world as it ***is.***

Although my story may not be unique, its events and details make it mine. During this holiday season, may we all find the courage and conviction to tell our stories, and may we also demonstrate the kindness and sensitivity to empower others to share their stories with us. Chag Sameach.

Passover and Infertility - Charoset and Apples

By: Rabbi Idit Solomon Berkeley, CA

Early in the Exodus story Pharaoh's decreed hard labor for the Children of Israel and that their baby girls may live but their baby boys may not. Despite this harsh reality, they continued to have children. The Midrash teaches that this is connected to apples. The women would take their husbands to the fields to entice them. They would conceive and then return to the fields to give birth and prevent the Egyptians from killing their sons. This all happened *under apple trees* as it says in Song of Songs 8.5: "*under the apple tree* I roused you; it was there your mother conceived you, there she who bore you conceived you."

During enslavement in Egypt, one of the ways the Children of Israel expressed their spiritual freedom was by conceiving their future. Literally. Their hope was that the next generation would serve God and not Pharaoh.

Some among us, however, are not free to conceive their future. Their hopes and dreams are enslaved by fertility challenges. Infertility can feel like a form of bondage: bodies that feel broken or unable to perform as we wish, decisions that seem impossible at times to navigate, and circumstances that seem out of our control.

On Passover we eat charoset to symbolize the clay our ancestors used to hold together the bricks they were making. The charoset also represents the sweetness of their redemption to serve God. By adding apples to our charoset, we invoke these symbols as well as the connection to fertility. We connect our past, present and future with the Song of Songs, the apple trees, intimacy, conception, birth and redemption.

Meditation for making and eating charoset with apples for those experiencing fertility challenges:

God of our ancestors, our souls are afflicted.
While we may be free in most ways, our dreams of fertility seem out of reach.
With the sweetness of these apples, comes the bitter taste of disappointment and loss. Under the apple tree – shade us with your blessings.
Under the apple tree – may we find comfort with each other.
Under the apple tree – help us conceive a hopeful future.

Creator and Redeemer of all, let this charoset strengthen our souls. May the sweetness of its apples linger with us.
Grant us clarity and hope along the way
to redemption.

The Many Voices of Infertility: Passover and All Year

Support for Infertility in the Jewish Community

By: Alissa Hirshfeld-Flores, MFT Santa Rosa, CA

Many Jewish holidays can evoke grief for women and couples experiencing infertility. Rosh Hashana brings the Torah stories of the matriarch Sarah, finally learning she's pregnant in her old age, after struggling with infertility for decades, and of Hannah--who prays so fervently for a child that the priest Eli takes her for a drunkard. Channukah and Purim can evoke the envy of watching friends' children light up with glee over the fun of the holidays. As one friend recently put it, "Channukah just isn't fun without little ones around."

Perhaps no holiday is as replete with themes of fertility and birth as Passover, during the spring season of rebirth. In the Passover story, the Jewish nation is literally *so* fertile that pharaoh commands that their baby boys be thrown into the Nile for fear they will grow into a nation that will overpower the Egyptians. The brave midwives, Shifrah and Puah, save these babies, telling pharaoh that the Jewish women give birth so quickly, and in such high numbers, that they cannot possibly gather all their infant boys. Imagine hearing this story year after year, while trying, and failing, to conceive. Jewish culture values the family above all else, except perhaps the Torah or a good brisket. Thus, being childless can feel shameful and isolating.

Passover was my mother's favorite holiday. Early in my marriage, I looked forward to hosting her at our home in California, where she'd travel from the East Coast, after so many years of enjoying her beautifully prepared family seders. I happily anticipated showing her the lilacs blooming in our backyard--both of our favorite flower--reminiscent of those outside my childhood house. But my excitement over her visit was tempered by the fact that I had not yet been able to give her grandchildren. I'd prepared a beautiful meal and created a spiritually meaningful Haggadah, but there were no little ones present to ask the Four Questions or to excitedly search for the Afikomen. Part of the purpose of the seder is to pass on the story of Jewish survival to the next generation. Would our family have a next generation to continue the faith and lineage? I identified with the Israelites wandering in the desert, as I felt lost in my own desert of barrenness. When we invited in the Prophet Elijah, I prayed to this purveyor of miracles to grant me my wish for a baby.

Raised in a traditional Conservative home, I had long been interested in exploring how Judaism can provide meaning to our modern lives, through the renewal and reinterpretation of ancient teachings and rituals. I began to look to Jewish resources for how to cope with infertility, reading essays and creative prayers by women rabbis about fertility, pregnancy and childbirth. I was grateful that women's experiences and voices were increasingly a part of our tradition, as I drew from their wisdom. I began to put myself in the shoes of our matriarchs--Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah--and was inspired by their patience and faith. About the same time, I had a woman friend in my synagogue community who experienced a miscarriage. Alone with her disenfranchised grief, she felt that she could not share her pain with many friends, lest she be told, "You can always have another baby." Friends didn't understand the unique bond she'd had with *this* particular child. Her struggles with infertility afterwards only added to her feeling

isolated and excluded. Like many women I've counseled through infertility, she felt many conflicted feelings when invited to friends' baby showers--a churning in her stomach of joy for them, tempered by her own grief, jealousy, longing, and bitterness.

When my friend next became pregnant, she asked that our Jewish renewal community develop a ritual for her to celebrate and pray for her and her baby. Our *rebbetzin* at the time, herself in rabbinical school, designed a beautiful ceremony where we women sat in a circle with our friend, as the *rebbetzin* dipped her feet in water, in a symbolic mikveh to mark the holiness and transition of this time in her life. We took turns offering her blessings, to comfort her pain over past loss, soothe her worries and fears, and offer hope for new life.

I was inspired by this ritual to develop my own. One Shabbat, during the days in between Passover and Shavuot, when my community was offering each other creative, individualized Priestly Blessings, I asked that a group of my women friends encircle me to send blessings for fruitfulness. As I felt their love surround me, I felt their strength infuse me and I knew that I would be better able both to maintain faith whether or not I bled the next month. I also realized that if it was not my fate to be blessed with my own children, I would find a way to have children in my life, through friends, family and my counseling work.

The practice of developing creative rituals within Judaism has made my faith feel more authentic. I have gone on to co-create rituals marking friends' hysterectomies and menopausal passages. As more Jewish women leaders and lay leaders add our experiences to Jewish practices, the tradition itself grows, expands, and becomes more life-giving and more fruitful. Eventually, my husband and I were blessed with a beautiful baby girl. I've celebrated as she's chanted the Four Questions at seder, rose to the Torah for her Bat Mitzvah, and has grown into a strong and articulate young woman in her own right. I continue to pray that as a community we will include and support the disenfranchised grief in our own midst, even as we celebrate the joyous miracles of life and rebirth.

The Many Voices of Infertility: Passover and All Year

Tips and Resources for Dealing with Infertility

By: Erin Levin Schlozman, MA LPC Denver, Colorado

In Judaism, we are told to "be fruitful and multiply." We come from a tradition steeped heavily in a narrative filled with the promise of creating new life. How many of you were asked as soon as you broke the glass under the Chuppah: when are you going to start trying for a baby? This question seems earnest and innocent, however the reality is that 1 in 8 couples will have a difficult time getting or staying pregnant. For couples that are facing infertility questions like "are you trying to get pregnant?" and "what are you waiting for?" can feel intensely personal and also crushing. Below are ways you can empower yourself, or help support the people you love once a person or couple has been referred to a fertility specialist.

Most fertility specialists will begin with a detailed intake that will gather you and your partner's information including medical history, social history and the history of your reproductive health. Additionally, ultrasounds and labs may be ordered for the medical team to get an idea of a baseline and to begin identifying the source of what is going on. I always suggest bringing a list of questions to this first appointment that touch on the concerns you have. Suggestions for things you may want to ask:

1. What is the process for identifying my diagnosis and how will this diagnosis inform my treatment?
2. How long do you think the initial workup will take and when do you estimate we will be able to move forward with treatment?
3. What courses of treatment do you recommend/are most commonly successful in your practice? Additionally, what are my treatment options?
4. How long do we focus on each treatment and at what point do we move to a new treatment? For example: if we start with IUI how long before we discuss IVF.
5. Is there anything I can do to improve my chances of becoming and staying pregnant during the course of treatment?
6. Are there any lifestyle changes you recommend?

Infertility brings a landslide of emotions including immense vulnerability, feelings that you have no control and moments of intense sadness. When we think about growing our families we think about future homes, communities, holidays, birthdays and milestones. Experiencing infertility can feel like the biggest threat to those things. When you take your journey to have a baby from the bedroom to a doctor's office it's only natural that floods of emotion will come with you. Stress, sadness, excitement, grief and fear all bundled together. Here are a few tips on how to provide yourself self-care during this time.

1. **Educate yourself on the medical components of infertility**. Gathering information and education can help you feel empowered and whittle away at the feelings of powerlessness that come with the process.

2. **Identify your support system, both individually and as a couple**. Finding a therapist that specializes in infertility or a group for families going through fertility treatments will help you build your tribe and a support system that knows exactly what you are going through. Also, social media outlets have support groups that many women find helpful.
3. **Try your best to focus in the moment**. Be your own best advocate and don't get caught up in future worries and anxieties: what if this happens, what if this doesn't work, what if what if what if. Do your best to live in the moment and don't give too much power to the what if's.
4. b. You may wake up feeling great one morning and incredibly sad the next. You may feel you don't recognize yourself, like you have changed forever and wonder if you'll ever return to the person you were before you started trying to get pregnant. This is ok. Allow yourself the moment to honor however you are feeling and remember that all feelings pass.
5. **Engage in regular check-ins with your partner**. Infertility is a partners experience. Make sure you keep up your communication, try to make time for fun and to connect to one another in some way. Given the stringent requirements surrounding treatment, sex may be off the table at certain times- practice other ways of sharing intimate moments outside of intercourse.

As the primary focus of fertility treatments is medical, I can't stress enough the importance of tapping into your community to help support your emotional, spiritual and physical needs. While you work toward parenthood, know that your tradition and community stand behind you with great force, fierce love and an intense commitment to support you. Whether you yourself are going through fertility treatments, or someone you know and love is, it is important to always remember that no two journeys are the same and that a foundation of loving support and community can help ease the silence and pain of the experience of infertility.

The Fifth Child at Seder

By: Julie Bindeman, Psy-D Rockville, MD

One of the most familiar parts of the Passover Seder is the four sons/children. These children represent the different places in which people come to the Seder: knowing and wise; selfish (or wicked); simple (or not knowing); and the fourth is silent as he or she doesn't know what to ask and is just taking everything in. However, this breakdown doesn't include a fifth child missing from the Seder, whether we give voice to him or her or not. The fifth child is the child of potential: the child that those struggling with infertility are working to create or the child that almost was, but the pregnancy ended before its completion.

The biggest difference in the Passover Seder from other Jewish observances is that it isn't expected to occur in a synagogue within a large Jewish population. It occurs in homes across the world with families and friends gathering to retell the story. People come to this holiday in all different places and spaces in life: managing their own struggles whatever they might be. As 1 in 8 couples experience infertility and 1 in 4 pregnancies end in loss, it would be foolish to assume that someone struggling with these issues isn't attending a Seder with you. These struggles tend to be silent and invisible, especially within our holiday structure.

The idea of a fifth child is not a new one. In fact, the Lubavitcher Rebbe famously spoke about the fifth son of the Pesach Seder, but in doing so, was referring to Jews who had lost their faith and strayed from being Jewish. This idea has been one that my friend Rabbi Uri Topolosky has adopted and spoken about. He includes this fifth child at his Passover Seder, but not only as the child that has lost his or her Jewish way, but also as the child that is unformed and unable to physically be at the table.

Infertility and pregnancy loss are devastating experiences that are far too common and hidden. Giving them voice can be considered to be a great act of loving-kindness since many who struggle yearn to talk about it, but are unsure how others will respond. Many people attempt to say well-intentioned refrains such as, "Just relax, and you'll get pregnant;" "G-d only gives you what you can handle;" "This is part of G-d's plan for you" or "Why not adopt?" Hearing such advice often has the opposite effect. Rather than connecting, these comments make people who are on a fertility journey or grieving pregnancy loss want to retreat and isolate. It confirms that others aren't able to put themselves in their shoes or understand their pain, and reinforces the need to stay quiet about these experiences.

Including the "fifth child" at Seder reaffirms that families experiencing infertility or pregnancy losses are seen, not only by family and friends, but also by their religion. Ways to include the "fifth child" at your Seder:

The story of Passover leads to the Jews wandering for 40 years in the desert, searching for the Land of Israel. This parallels the journey of a couple struggling to build their family: looking forward with hope, waiting for it to happen, potentially lots of false turns, wondering if or when

their family will be complete, until (we pray) they reach their “promised land” of fulfilling the dream to parent. Whatever their promised land turns out to be, may they have a voice at the table. Let their hopes to tell the Passover story to their children be recognized.

In honor of this fifth child or for the many other reasons people may be missing from the Passover Table, considering asking a fifth question: who is missing from our Seder?

The High Chair

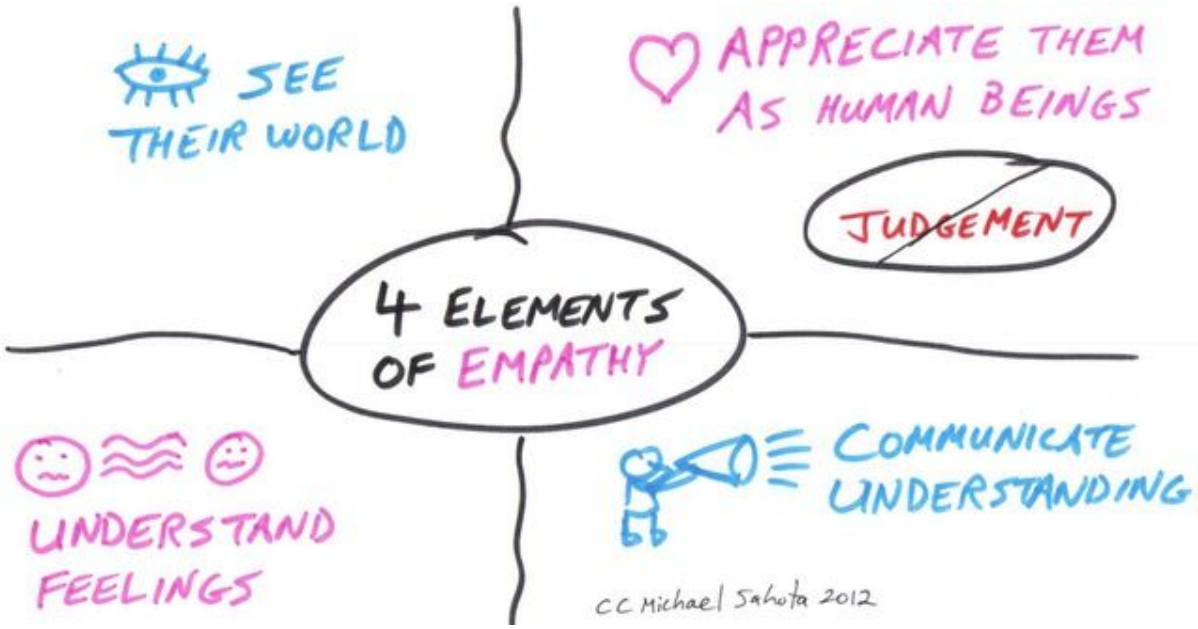
By: Rabbi Analia Bortz, MD Atlanta, GA

Once again around the table Passover dor l'dor
Why is this night different? It's not.

The bread of affliction, the bitter herbs...
My body is afflicted, my soul is bitter.
Would I have a next generation to tell the story?
I feel enslaved with chains of hormones and procedures. When would I break free?
Can I say Dayenu when it's still not enough?
Is my womb plagued with emptiness?
And there, next to Eliyahu's chair,
Waiting for the Messiah
There is a high chair,
Empty,
Lonely,
Hoping,
That next year wherever I am,
The laughter of my baby will be present at my Passover table.

Walking Together: Personal and Professional Reflections on Infertility

By: Tova Warburg Sinensky, Yoetzet Halacha Teaneck, NJ



We planned out when our children would be born with the precision of a train timetable. They would be neatly spaced, arriving two years apart, total number to be determined at some future date. Then secondary infertility struck and any illusion of control was shattered. Baby #2 was not going to arrive as we planned. The details, over a decade later, are mostly a blur. And while I've moved on, the impact of that experience comes into sharp focus when, as a Yoetzet Halacha, I work with couples that are struggling with the challenges of infertility. The way I provide support through our conversations and relationships is shaped by my having walked in their shoes.

Ten years ago I lived in a world in which open expression of vulnerability was still new. It was not a given that it was socially acceptable to share challenges with others, and it certainly was not commonplace. But I needed to talk in order to cope. Yet I was afraid of taking up other people's time or squandering their emotional resources. I was concerned that they really didn't want to hear about my challenges and that my problems would be a drain on them and on our relationships. I felt a sense of shame that I could not put on a facade and get through the day. These thoughts drained a significant amount of my own emotional energy. Yet I came to realize that the support that I personally needed at that time -- what got me through each day -- was genuine, ongoing invitations to talk.

Questions such as “How’s it going?” and simple greetings like, “Just checking in, thinking of you” sustained me. These overtures were a lifeline because they granted me a shame-free opening to share my messy, unsettled private world with those who I could safely assume *genuinely wanted to hear.* They reassured me that my infertility and all its emotional packaging did not render me “other.” They reinforced for me that I still belonged, despite all the things I felt -- loneliness, fear, frustration, failure -- and despite the degree to which I was now atypically the “taker” in my relationships.

When I think about this time in my life, the hardest part was not the medical consultations. Not the waiting. Not the guilt. Not the anxiety. Not even the “happily ever after” ending that was rewritten. Rather, the emotions I can still summon -- the most painful ones -- were feeling like a burden and like an outsider. How it felt when I interacted with people who knew what I was experiencing, yet conversed with me as if they had never heard what I shared. How it felt to be asked, “How’s it going?,” and then sensing that the person did not really want to know the answer or could not handle discussing it. How it felt to hear well-intended comments such as, “I hope you have support,” and not “how can I support you?,” -- leading me to feel that I indeed *was* a burden that should be offloaded to someone else. I was very vulnerable and highly sensitive to feelings of rejection and being unwanted, and the guesswork involved in processing responses or lack thereof was mental agony. At the core, these interactions left me feeling unembraced and estranged by those who had once welcomed me.

Recently, a growing body of research has spurred conversations about empathy -- the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. There is great focus on its importance in the lives of individuals, families and and communities. Discussions abound about how to teach it and how to embody it. This is probably because we are increasingly exposed to detailed and ongoing narratives of the suffering of others -- the stigmas and taboos of sharing have been broken -- and we now need to learn the skills to effectively support one another.

Stepping into another’s shoes -- with their own unique sizes, styles, and wear-and-tear -- and walking in their footsteps is one of the key ingredients of empathy. Doing so provides us with insight and understanding into how they, as unique individuals, are navigating their predicament, thereby helping us to *understand them and communicate understanding*. This was for me the single most powerful means of support: when family, friends and colleagues conveyed that they understood. Understood that I had a lot to talk about. Understood that I needed to talk about it. Understood that I felt like a “taker.” Understood that feeling like a taker left me with shame. And understood that in order to quiet that feeling, I needed to feel embraced through genuine requests to share. Eloquently put by Brené Brown, “Empathy is the antidote to shame.”

The Torah, our age-old guidebook for how to live, is replete with both narratives and laws that highlight the importance of empathy. Among these is the commandment in Exodus 23:9, “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger: You were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes that the focus on strangers in this commandment is intriguing; after all, isn’t it important to be empathetic toward parents,

children, spouses, and colleagues? He notes that current research suggests that it is easy to be empathetic toward people to whom we relate and with whom we identify; but it is extremely challenging to be empathetic toward people who are outside of our immediate circles, to those who are not the same -- to those we regard as strangers. Therefore, God prioritizes showing empathy to the stranger to convey that while it may go against our nature to do so, while it may feel uncomfortable, while it may feel hard -- we are nonetheless charged with understanding and sharing the feelings of *all* human beings and responding with empathy. In fact, he suggests, learning about empathy was one of the purposes of our national suffering in Egypt. Maybe we are meant to be the nation that champions empathy.

Many of us find ourselves on the front line for someone struggling with infertility, or with other life challenges. For some, displaying empathy comes naturally. For others, due to personal experiences or personality traits, it may feel hard. One way or another, it is vital to recognize the life-changing impact that empathy can have on our our family, friends, community and on the world at large. Drawing on our national and personal experiences, let's make a commitment to working on the transformative trait of empathy. In the words of Maya Angelou, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel."

Why We Chose to Have our Seder Alone

By: Rachel Goldsmith Kew Garden Hills, NY

I have a close friend who once told me that she and her husband were having Seder alone. At the time, I thought that sounded like the most depressing scenario ever, and I worked hard to convince her to spend a holiday meal with me and my husband. Having grown up at big family sedarim, I could not even fathom what a seder attended by two would even look like. I hate to admit it, but I was a little bit judgemental of them for being *sooo* antisocial.

Fast forward to three years later:

When others heard that my husband and I were having our Seder alone this year, they quickly invited us to theirs, assuming it was because we had nowhere to go. B"H we had invites (as baalei teshuva, we haven't always had invites, so this is actually a very genuine gratitude). Pesach is a holiday where people should be with their family. According to the Haggadah, the whole point of the holiday is to tell our children all about when we were freed from slavery in Egypt. Seders across the world are usually held in a room full of happy people, with children running around. But not in our home. As of now, our little family is comprised of only two.

My husband and I have reached a point where we no longer want to be bystanders, observing how others hand down the story of the Exodus to their children. We truly long to be teaching our own. When you're enduring the test of infertility, most holidays are difficult. For me, Pesach is the worst. Over the past three years, Pesach transformed from my favorite holiday (really!) to my most dreaded, most emotionally challenging time of year. This is the time when we're supposed to pass our traditions to the next generation, but we still don't know if and when our next generation will begin to be built.

Pesach was always a "north star" on the infertility compass for me. This year, we're entrapped in loneliness; next year, we should be (in Jerusalem) making a seder for a table filled with our own children. The week before last Pesach, our reproductive endocrinologist told us that we needed to prepare ourselves for a future filled with IVF cycles; by Shavuos, we were well into our first cycle. When we got pregnant from a frozen transfer last summer, we were due during Pesach, until that ended in a miscarriage. I would have been devastated by this news regardless, but now I had to worry about how I would face another Pesach with just the two of us.

I don't intend to sound bitter or depressing. Sometimes, I am grateful for all the time G-d has given us to devote to building our marriage. I also enjoy the luxury of uninterrupted time to curl up with a book, or (especially before Pesach) having my home remain just as neat and tidy as I've left it. But as much as I can try to think about the plus sides, they seem like a small consolation for this very big *nesayon (test of faith).*

The Many Voices of Infertility: Passover and All Year

So this year, we took back Pesach. Instead of another dreaded year of plastering on smiles and pretending to be joyously celebrating the holiday, we decided to stay home, where we could openly cry to Hashem all we wanted. I sobbed through my husband's *drasha* on the four sons and, without anyone else there, I felt so free to do so. We read stories of tzadikim, miracles, and of future generations. We used the seder night as an opportunity to connect with each other and with Hashem, and to learn and pray, rather than just as a painful reminder of what's lacking in our lives.

I know that many of my friends and compatriots in the "infertile" club don't have this luxury due to family obligations. And I know that for many of you, seder night surrounded by your nieces and nephews is often a funny mix of awesome and painful, all in one. But if you have the chance to set aside a little time to step away from all the holiday chaos and just focus, and let your emotions run through you in full-force if you like, I highly recommend it.

May we all experience open miracles and liberation from that which holds us captive!