

***Walking Together:
Personal and Professional Reflections on Infertility***

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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."