

Rosh HaShanah 1 5778: Infertility

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Young Sarah, aged 20—if that—beams with the radiance of a new bride. She is so lucky to have met Avram, a humble, good-looking guy from down the river, and she cannot wait to build a future and a family with him. She has heard the stories told of his family--of the sons and daughters born to every couple, going back 20 generations! How fertile! How prolific! What a full family tree, and her children will be the newest, brightest green leaves. You know where this story goes. We just read the happy ending in our reading from the Torah. It opens, *V'Adonai pakad et-Sarah ka'asher amar, vaya'as Adonai l'Sarah ka'aher diber*,¹ “God took note of Sarah as God had promised, and God did for Sarah as God had said”. At the ripe age of 90, long after her body should have been able to grow another human being, she gives birth to Isaac, the child of her incredulous laughter.

But it's those years between young Sarah's dreams and the much-celebrated birth of Yitzchak that must be our focus today.

Why?

Because every year, when we gather at this holiest of days to celebrate birth--the birth of the world, the beginning of a fresh new year, the new lives that have come into our families and our world since last we gathered--there are most definitely those who wish desperately to be part of that celebration... and are not. Infertility has been a part our people's story from those early narratives in the Torah, and it continues to be today.

¹ Genesis 21:1

So often, though, we don't know when a couple or a woman is struggling to become pregnant, because we are socialized not to talk about it. We wouldn't know what to say. We struggle to find the words of support. Infertility often means suffering alone. And it doesn't need to be that way. So, today, we're going to talk about it.

First, a definition, taken from the website of Resolve, the national infertility association: "Infertility is defined as the inability to conceive after one year of unprotected intercourse (six months if the woman is over age 35) or the inability to carry a pregnancy to live birth."²

And a statistic: The percentage of American women of reproductive age who have received help for infertility in their lifetime is 12.5%, or 7.4 million. That means that 1 out of every 8 women we encounter has experienced--or is currently experiencing--infertility. At that rate, infertility has no doubt affected many in our lives and in our own community.

Let me broaden out the categories of people who are affected by infertility, as it's not only the 1 out of 8 women of reproductive age who don't yet have children. It's also their husbands or boyfriends, their girlfriends, wives, or partners. It can be a woman or a couple who have a child but who are struggling with what's called secondary infertility--the inability to conceive another child--and therefore the other child or children in the family are affected as well.

If a woman or couple has chosen to share their journey with parents or other relatives or friends, those people are now also on the journey. Parents of men and women struggling with infertility, as you can imagine—or maybe you know firsthand—are anxious for every drop of information and carry the

² <<http://www.resolve.org/about-infertility/what-is-infertility/>>

heavy emotion that goes along with wishing so hard for something your child wants so badly.

Anyone who has gone through any version of infertility, whether that journey ended with children or in the decision to live without them, can access the emotional strife brought on by the struggle. Those feelings don't retire easily.

Let's head back to our matriarchs and join them on their infertility journeys.

First, there was Sarah, the maternal star of our Torah reading. The years before the miraculous birth of Isaac weren't so glamorous. How desperately she wanted to be a mom, to be able to pass on the life she and Abraham were creating to a new generation, to be just like every other woman in the family and, presumably, in the communities in which they found themselves over the years. It wasn't working. Month after month, she would hope for something to change, but that cycle, regular as the moon's waxing and waning, just kept reminding her that no life was growing inside. Remember what she did, out of such desperation? Genesis 16 is clear as day:

"Sarai, Avram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Avram, 'Look, the LORD has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her.' *Ulai ibaneh mimenah*. And Avram heeded Sarai's request."³

This is probably the earliest record we have of a surrogacy-type situation—or, as they are called today, gestational carriers. The problem for Sarah is that the child was the son of Abraham, but he never became her son; he was always the son of the carrier, Hagar. Sarah finally kicks Hagar and Yishmael

³ Genesis 16:1-2

out of the shared home and into the desert, while Abraham looks on, paralyzed.

While Sarah's actions appear extra harsh—after all, she's basically condemning Hagar and Yishmael to death—we might be able to understand the emotion that drives her to such extremes. After years and years of barrenness, a failed attempt at becoming a mother through surrogacy, and even once she has her own baby, Sarah feels less-than, mocked by the very presence of the woman who conceived with such ease... and her child, now aged 13. Sarah is not so different from women and couples today who struggle to conceive. It seems that everyone else already has kids, or has just announced a pregnancy on Facebook in some cute new way. It's everything a woman can do to hold it together when she receives another invitation to a baby shower, a bris, or baby naming. If only there was someone else to take it out on...

Of course, Sarah isn't the only barren woman in the Torah, nor is she the only one highlighted today. At the center of the haftarah is Chanah, a childless wife in love with her husband Elkanah and jealous of Elkanah's other wife, Peninah, who—of course—brings children into the world like it's her job. Elkanah, who is beside himself because Chanah is so upset, offers this attempt at comfort: "Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?"⁴ We can only imagine her reaction.

On their annual trip to the shrine in Shiloh, Chanah pours out her soul to God, weeping uncontrollably because there's simply nothing else she can do. She tries bargaining with God—if you just give me a child, I'll dedicate him to your

⁴ | Samuel 1:8

service! It turns out that she wasn't totally alone. Someone else was in the shrine, the priest Eli, who mistakes her tears for a drunken stupor and says some pretty offensive things.

Like Sarah, Chanah does eventually conceive and bear a child—Samuel the prophet—and he does spend his life dedicated to the service of God. While both of these stories end in happy families and bright hope for the future—and that's clearly the intended message for Rosh HaShanah—it's also crucial that we lift up the painful parts. Because poor Chanah! In her darkest moments, she is alone. Nobody is able to offer her a shoulder to cry on. Nobody bears witness to her pain.

Unfortunately, this is often the case today for couples trying to conceive, including those going through fertility treatments. They feel so isolated—sometimes even from each other. If they are keeping their struggles private, not many people know their sadness and their longing, and therefore don't have the opportunity to be supportive. Even within their relationship, nobody knows like that woman what it's like to have to stick to such a regimented medication schedule, or to have to be given shots day after day to stimulate the growth of her eggs. And if her partner is a man, nobody knows like him what it's like for the quote-unquote “easy” part of making a baby not to work—how that plays into societal assumptions about manliness, how unfair it feels that the woman would have to go through so much because his sperm isn't working. There's so much disappointment and shame around infertility, in part because it's often very private—sometimes because that's a couple or a person's choice, or because we as a society aren't close to being good at being a safe space for people to talk about it. Remember how many people are having this experience—1 in 8 couples. We need to get better at this.

One more from the Tanach. Rachel. Jacob's beloved wife, and mother to his favored sons Joseph and Benjamin. But the children took a long time, because she was also barren. And unlike Sarah and Chanah, whose jealousy was directed at their husbands' other wives, it was Rachel's own sister Leah who seemed to be a veritable baby machine—6 baby boys in a row and a baby girl, all before Rachel could get pregnant. The Torah gives us a glimpse into Rachel's pain. After Leah's 4th son, Judah, was born, Rachel said to Jacob, tears streaming down her face, "Give me children, or I shall die."⁵ That's the sentiment, isn't it? How many women, how many couples have felt that... their lives are worth nothing if they cannot have a child with whom to share it? And poor Jacob, he just couldn't find the right thing to say. The Torah records that his initial response was one of anger. He said to Rachel, "Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?"⁶ How hurtful for Rachel. If only he could articulate his true feelings: "I want this so much too. It hurts." If only they could validate each other's pain.

Our tradition is replete with these stories of women's struggles to conceive. And the very image of the barren woman weaves in and out throughout the Tanach, most notably in the joyous melodies of Hallel, where we praise God for transforming "a barren woman into a happy mother of children."⁷ Notably, each of these narratives of struggle ends with the birth of a child, which does not necessarily match real life. Why would the Torah present so many of these struggles, only to resolve them happily?

⁵ Genesis 30:1

⁶ Ibid. 30:2

⁷ Psalms 113:9

I have 3 working theories about why the Tanach portrays so many of our matriarchs struggling with infertility.

The first theory is that the biblical image of the infertile woman is one of strength and determination, even an image of faith. It's true that each of these women sheds tears and expresses anger. But at no point does any of them walk away from her husband or her community. Chanah even turns *toward* God in her time of need.

The second theory is that the Tanach presents these situations to demonstrate God's kindness and mercy. The Talmud contains a lovely teaching from the 2nd-century Rabbi Yochanan, who says: "Three keys the Holy Blessed One has retained in God's own hands and not entrusted to the hand of any messenger—namely, the Key of Rainfall, the Key of Childbirth, and the Key of the Revival of the Dead".⁸ Each of these areas, says Rabbi Yochanan, is out of the control of human beings, no matter how much we pray for them. We may not like that certain things are out of our control—childbirth included—but it's a reality. And you know what? In each case of a barren matriarch who does conceive, the Tanach says *vayiftach Adonai et-rachmah*, "God opened her womb."

But this 3rd theory is the most relevant today: The Tanach includes the stories of infertility because they are a real part of people's lives. The Torah doesn't shy away from difficult subjects—destruction, death, war, sibling rivalry, or infertility. Thank God for this opening to discuss it.

I've spoken generally about the struggles of those women and couples dealing with infertility. If you were here last year on Shavuot, you had the privilege of learning from our own congregant Dr. Josh Hurwitz, a reproductive

⁸ Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 2a

endocrinologist, about the many options for assisted reproductive technology, including but not limited to IVF, in vitro fertilization. There's so much information online, but for now, just a few facts: fertility treatments can include hormone pills for men and/or women, hormone shots for women, frequent bloodwork and ultrasounds, and the least romantic settings for conception. Women and couples who go these routes do so out of their deep desire to be biological parents, just like Sarah, Rachel, and Chanah. They cry a lot, they are stressed, they try everything in their power to make time go more quickly until the next appointment, and then they wait some more to see if the science worked. Even with the incredible advances in reproductive technology, Rabbi Yochanan's teaching holds true: That key to childbirth ultimately remains in God's hands.

Which brings us right back to the present day, this first day of Rosh HaShanah. With the knowledge that families in our own community and all around us are experiencing so much pain and yearning, what can we do as individuals and as a community?

First, we can be more aware of our communal language regarding families and children. When we assume that every couple can create a child at the drop of a hat, we exclude those struggling to conceive from the conversation and from our community. This is true for public settings, like sermons or lectures, as well as private conversations. Imagine if you and your partner were struggling to have a child, and someone else casually asked you at kiddush why you're waiting so long. We can do better.

Along similar lines, when we celebrate children in the synagogue, we implicitly leave out those who don't have them. It's much easier, says Maharat

Ruth Balinsky Friedman in her Washington Post article⁹ from last year, to “be a community that celebrates births, without considering the babies who are not born. It’s easier to enjoy happy moments without recognizing that those times may be sad for others.” An obvious child-centered shul moment is when we call up all children for an aliyah on Simchat Torah. We can build into that space the acknowledgement that there are children some of us wish were up there, but they don’t exist. Not yet, anyway. In this way, we can transform a moment of potential exclusion into one of validation and support.

Third, as individuals, we can do better at receiving someone’s story of infertility, however uncomfortable or awkward it might make us feel. If and when someone feels comfortable to open up to us about a struggle to conceive, we might feel the urge to reassure him or her, to provide some hope. But it turns out that the most unwelcome response is this one: “It’ll work out for you, I’m sure. Just relax.” For anyone who’s spent the last twelve months or more relaxing, they know it’s not that simple. The best role a fellow congregant can play is one of empathy. Just validating how hard the struggle sounds, whether you’ve experienced it or not, is incredibly helpful. By being a good receiver, you open the door to further sharing. You help to share the emotional burden, which is huge.

And finally, a really big one. I have skipped over the money during this teaching, but it’s unavoidable. A single round of IVF—which includes doctors’ appointments, lots of hormone treatments, a minor surgery to remove as many eggs as possible from the woman, a sperm collection from the man, combining the eggs and the sperm and watching them grow, then transferring

⁹ <[9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/03/30/when-youre-facing-infertility-a-synagogue-can-be-the-most-painful-place-to-go-lets-change-that/?utm_term=.bf04d0015b9f.></p></div><div data-bbox=)

the embryo back into the woman—can cost \$20,000. And if a couple chooses to test the embryos to see if they have the right number of chromosomes, they can tack on another \$3,000, at least. If a couple or woman is lucky, insurance will help, but we know how insurance coverage varies. And what happens, God forbid, if the coverage runs out? There's a serious financial barrier to building a family when infertility is involved. And I'm not sure what to do about it. A simple Google search turns up a small handful of Jewish communities in our country that have raised up infertility as a communal concern, and they're putting their money where their mouth is. Dallas, Kansas City KS, Atlanta, Philadelphia, and Northern CA all have grant programs for Jewish couples struggling with infertility. The grants are limited, of course, because of the massive costs for each family, but it's a start. A couple of months ago, I participated in a conference in New York that brought together rabbis, therapists, and community leaders to tackle the very issue of infertility struggles in the Jewish community. The conversations were thoughtful and passionate, which is a great start. A grant program has not yet been established, but I hope that is one of the outcomes. If the Jewish world cares enough about bringing Jewish babies into the world as it does about connecting 18-26 year olds to Israel, then we will find a way to create a different kind of Birth-Right—a literal one. I wish I'd come up with that comparison; I didn't, but it's absolutely worth sharing.

Now, let's be clear. Some people choose a childless life, and that is all well and good. My intention this morning is not to criticize that choice, but rather to highlight the incredible difficulty many individuals and couples have when they *do* want to bring a baby into the world. If we learn just one thing from

the struggles of our matriarchs, it's that the empathy of a partner or a friend, and the openness of a community, can transform a very lonely and trying time into one where the burden might be shared, just a little bit. And that support can make all the difference.

I'll close today with a prayer, written by Rabbi Elana Perry (Wise Temple, Cincinnati, OH). I invite you to call to mind anyone you know who is struggling to conceive, or who has struggled to conceive, and hold them in your heart on this birth day of our beautiful world:

Mi Shebeirach imoteinu, Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel v' Chanah...

May the One who blessed our foremothers, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah, when they each sought You in their longing for a child, bless those and answer those who call out to You now.

Continue to be a source of life and a source of hope for all who seek You.

For all who yearn to be a parent,

may the coming year be one of healing and vitality, deliverance and consolation, fruitfulness and joy, goodness and profound blessing.

And let us say: Amen.