

High Holy Day Sermon 5779/2018  
by Rabbi Marina Yergin

A little over 8 months ago, Dave and I were blessed with a beautiful baby boy, Trevor Miles Yergin. While it began a new phase of our life, it paused another one; our infertility journey. Being a mom was a dream of mine since I was a little girl, so when Dave and I were having trouble conceiving, we discussed our options and met with doctors and specialists – ultimately discovering we both had issues contributing to our inability to conceive on our own. We spent over a year completing tests – from blood draws to fairly invasive procedures. Our fertility specialist told us that all of the results pointed to us needing to do in-vitro fertilization, or IVF, in order to conceive. IVF “is a procedure that involves retrieving eggs and sperm... and placing them together in a laboratory dish to enhance fertilization. Fertilized eggs are then transferred several days later into the female....”<sup>1</sup>

IVF is a medical marvel and an example of today’s amazing technology. It is also painful, exhausting – both emotionally and physically, and very costly ... around the \$15,000 range when procedures, medications, and testing are all said and done. After all of this, we had 10 viable embryos – an unusually high number. The embryologists chose the most viable embryo and Trevor’s first home became a little plastic petri dish.

So often we see what is on the outside and not the struggles on the inside. I have a healthy, adorable, loving baby boy, but most of you did not know the difficulties Dave and I endured to have him. The process was a long and difficult one that put strain on our relationship, our views of self-worth, and our feelings of loneliness and isolation.

In Jewish communities, we often focus on children. For holidays, we have Passover, which is all about teaching traditions to children, and Shabbat is celebrated with a blessing for children. Many of our life-cycles have rituals surrounding children; bris, baby naming, consecration, b’nei mitzvah, and confirmation. Then you have the rituals that mention children, even if they aren’t specifically about children; marriages with the hope of raising a Jewish family, and deaths where the children recite the Mourner’s Kaddish for a year in honor of their parents’ memory. So think about those who are struggling with infertility coming into a Jewish community. Those who are asked by the stereotypical Jewish hopeful grandmothers “So, when will I have some grandbabies?” Those

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rmatx.com/fertility-services/ivf-invitro-fertilization/>

who avoid going to Simchat Torah or Shavuot because there are celebrations for children. Those who feel an inordinate amount of pressure to start a family. And those who are desperate to start a family and are constantly reminded of their struggles.

We think of these people as the outliers, the ones who are navigating the “uncommon” infertility challenges. However, according to the 2006-2010 National Survey of Family Growth by the CDC, 1 in 8 couples have trouble getting pregnant or sustaining a pregnancy.<sup>2</sup> Those facing infertility are common, yet many people still feel it is a taboo topic -- hidden from others and kept as a private journey. Why are we afraid to talk about it? The Torah sure isn't. In Judaism, our patriarchs and matriarchs; Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel, and Leah, all experienced infertility.

We begin with Sarah, who we learn immediately, is barren. She and Abraham do not conceive their own child until she is 90 and he is 100. When both Abraham and Sarah are told that they are going to have a child at such an old age, they don't even know how to react to this absurd suggestion, so they laugh. We don't know how Abraham and Sarah felt during their long years of not being able to conceive – only the mention of the struggles their relationship endured as Sarah told Abraham to have a child with Hagar – a harrowing and emotional decision – and the first example of a form of surrogacy.

Then comes Rebecca and Isaac, the couple who had a 20-year lapse between getting married and having their first child. It's not as much as Abraham and Sarah, but still significant. Isaac did not take another wife or concubine to have an heir, he worked through the difficulty of infertility with Rebecca.

Finally comes Jacob, Rachel and Leah. Their story truly shows a relationship strain between spouses, family, and friends. Rachel and Leah are sisters and are both married to Jacob. Leah thought that because she was able to have children easier, Jacob would maybe love her more than Rachel. Leah, however, had difficulty conceiving later in life. Both women use their concubines to produce children for Jacob, complicating the situation further. Rachel and Jacob, though they both loved each other, had an unfortunate exchange in which their frustrations over infertility boil over. Through all of this, though, they were still able to conceive.

There is one more famous story of infertility in our Tanach, from the first book of Samuel that I want to highlight. It is the Haftarah portion we traditionally read on Rosh Hashanah about Hannah, Peninnah, and their husband, Elkanah.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://resolve.org/infertility-101/what-is-infertility/fast-facts/>

Peninnah, the wife that was not as loved, was able to conceive, and Hannah, the beloved wife, was unable to conceive. Peninnah would torment her sister to show off the fact that she could have children. In Elkanah's devastation, he asked Hannah why he wasn't enough for her. Hannah never answered, but went to pray – moving her lips, but not saying anything.

Infertility is mentioned throughout our Bible, not just in these four situations. It is discussed in stories and in laws, in punishments and in examples of prayer. All of this reminds us that infertility is not uncommon.

Dealing with infertility brings many challenges to relationships with spouses, friends, and family, but there is also a huge impact on individual emotions. Those of us who have dealt with these struggles, have had to endure many varied emotions, including anger, jealousy, and shame. Often these emotions come all at once or overlap. Our Tanach gives us a great insight into some of these situations.

Anger is probably the easiest emotion to understand in terms of infertility. The tests, appointments, procedures, and the impatience of waiting for results that come with infertility are enough to anger and frustrate the calmest of people and test the relationships with even the most solid of couples, friends, and family. However, the God component of being angry is really highlighted in our text. According to *And Hannah Wept: Infertility, Adoption, and the Jewish Couple* by Michael Gold, "infertility in the Bible is a form of punishment,...[a] divine displeasure."<sup>3</sup> In each of our stories with Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, and Hannah, their fertility is restored once they (or their husbands) improve their relationship with God – through prayer or action. Well, talk about anger, that's infuriating as it implies that people are infertile because God is mad at us or punishing us. It also implies that we can only conceive if we pray or do something to better our relationship with God.

Our rabbis struggle with the idea of infertility and God's role too. In Yevamot it says: "...why were our ancestors barren? Because the Holy One... longs to hear the prayer of the righteous."<sup>4</sup> So, our ancestors were righteous, but that means those of us dealing with infertility are righteous also? Okay, but that is still frustrating. Are the rabbis saying that if someone has been praying and has not yet conceived, their prayers are not good enough?

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<sup>3</sup> Gold, Michael. *And Hannah Wept: Infertility, Adoption, and the Jewish Couple*. The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. 1988. p. 28-30.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 34. (found in Yevamot 64a)

Michael Gold reminds us that “only a tiny percentage of our liturgy asks God for favors....Prayer is not something we do to change God; it is something we do to transform ourselves. Our prayers are meant to give us a strength to cope, even if our circumstances remain unchanged.”<sup>5</sup> This helps to remind us that prayer is important, but not the solution. Our ancestors were righteous not because of their prayers but because of their actions and relationships with God. Gold continues “Action, not prayer, is the keystone of Judaism. An infertile Jewish couple who want a family must act in the medical sphere, or they must act to adopt. Often they must do both at the same time. Prayer may give them the strength to take action, but it cannot be a substitute.”<sup>6</sup> We know that there could be medical reasons for infertility, but that doesn’t mean that our anger with God subsides, or that we don’t feel as if we are being punished for something. Yet, we still have to take the steps to get help and look for the answers with medical professionals. We can pray for strength to endure the process, for the ability to eventually conceive and for the treatments to be successful, but we can’t expect God to make everything happen.

Rabbi Sara Mason Barkin explains God’s role differently. “...God responds through each one of us, as we expose the pain of this experience and bring it out into the open. God responds when we understand infertility not as a taboo topic, but as a painful experience. God responds through each one of us when we are more careful with our language: holding our tongues and not making assumptions when we meet a couple that does not have children. God responds through us: with awareness, with gentle words and open hearts.”<sup>7</sup>

These words give us a reminder to open our eyes to those around us. It is hopefully never our intention to upset others, but we see that this behavior happened anyway with Leah to Rachel, and Peninnah to Hannah. In the case of Peninnah, the rabbis ask what she did to torment Hannah.<sup>8</sup> In two different midrashim<sup>9</sup> – stories that help us understand the text – it says “Peninnah would

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<sup>5</sup> Gold, Michael. *And Hannah Wept: Infertility, Adoption, and the Jewish Couple*. The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. 1988. p. 69-70.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Sara Mason Barkin’s Nov 2016 Lech Lecha Torah column in the Bay Area JWeekly – from p. 2 of <http://www.hasidah.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Inclusive-Communities-Page.pdf> (full article found at <https://www.jweekly.com/2016/11/11/torah-the-timeless-pain-of-experiencing-infertility/>)

<sup>8</sup> 1 Samuel 1:6

<sup>9</sup> Midrash Samuel 1:8 and Pesikta Rabbati 43 from <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/peninnah-midrash-and-aggadah>

grieve Hannah by means of ordinary everyday activities, taking pains to remind her, at all hours of the day, of the difference between them.”<sup>10</sup>

It doesn't surprise me that the Rabbis conclude that it is everyday activities which remind Hannah of her journey with infertility. Many couples I have talked to have struggled to be in settings with children. Sometimes even standing behind a child and their parent at a grocery store can be painful. Clearly the child and parent in line have no intention of “rubbing it in their face”, but these emotions of jealousy and grief are so strong. It even seems as if the words in our machzor are throwing infertility in our face. During High Holy Days we are constantly talking about the Book of Life, which takes on a whole new meaning when someone is desperately wanting a new life to enter their family. Is this the year that our family will experience a new life? Or will there be a loss of a pregnancy – a miscarriage or a termination? Throughout our process of infertility, I felt – and still feel – struck by many of our liturgy's words – sometimes finding strength in them, and sometimes feeling discouraged or infuriated by them. No matter what, my everyday life was impacted because I was so desperate to have my own child.

This desperation is not just held for women, although that's what today's stereotypes and gender norms tell us. Not sure how it got that way, because, even in our biblical stories, the men wished for children. Infertility affected them too -- and not just in their relationships, but they experienced their own emotional turmoil.

The first commandment God gave us in Torah, to “be fruitful and multiply,”<sup>11</sup> is the hardest commandment to fulfill when you are dealing with infertility. So much more so for men, because according to the rabbis, men are the only ones who are required to procreate.<sup>12</sup>

The most referenced discussion of male infertility in Torah is Isaac. According to the rabbis, both Isaac and Rebecca were infertile because in Genesis it says “Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of [*le-nokhah* לְנוֹכַח] his wife.”<sup>13</sup> Instead of ‘for his wife,’ he prayed ‘*le-nokhah*’ – opposite, corresponding to his wife: he prayed for them both, because both were infertile.”<sup>14</sup> Later in Torah, it says that God answered Isaac, not Rebecca and not both of them – just Isaac.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/peninnah-midrash-and-aggadah>

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 1:28

<sup>12</sup> Gold, Michael. *And Hannah Wept: Infertility, Adoption, and the Jewish Couple*. The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. 1988. p. 20-28.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 25:21

<sup>14</sup> Yevamot 64a – quoted from Hasidah materials <https://www.hasidah.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Sources-and-Resources-Page.pdf>

This, the rabbis also explain, is why Isaac never took another wife to procreate with – because it wouldn't have mattered since he was infertile too.

Yesh Tikva, a Jewish organization helping those with infertility and raising awareness in the Jewish community,<sup>15</sup> explains that “about a third of infertility is attributed to the male partner, a third to the female partner, and a third is attributed to factors in both partners or is diagnosed as ‘unexplained infertility.’”<sup>16</sup> Regardless of who infertility is attributed to, the feeling of shame for not being able to do what your body is “supposed” to do is overwhelming. There is a feeling that your body has betrayed you. No wonder Sarah laughs when she is told she is going to have a baby at 90 years old – she has already come to the conclusion that her body has betrayed her and scoffs at the ridiculousness of the suggestion. Luckily, modern medicine, in many cases, has allowed couples to start a family. So it is not out of the realm of possibility for a person with a body, which they feel has betrayed them, to still create a family.

In writing this sermon, I struggled. Not necessarily because of the personal nature of it, but of the shame I feel sometimes in having a child. Don't get me wrong, I am unbelievably grateful for and so in love with Trevor and I wouldn't change anything. But, Dave and I were blessed with a child on our first round of IVF. So, so many others have not had it as easy. I have friends who have tried multiple rounds of IUI and/or IVF without success. I have friends who have had unsuccessful situations with surrogates or with adoption. I have friends who have had to terminate pregnancies in their first or second trimesters due to the discovery of health conditions which posed threats to the mother, the unborn child, and/or the future of that child, if they were to be born. I have friends who have had miscarriages or stillbirths. I have friends who have had to have hysterectomies because of their own health issues. To be clear, I am not saying my journey was easy – it wasn't. But I feel ashamed because I know what it was like to see pictures of children online and, while being excited for others, lamenting my own infertility. I know what it was like to be around families and be so sad that I couldn't have what they have. I know what it was like to hear parents complain about parenting – for whatever reason – and thinking “Well, at least you ARE a parent!” I'm not sure this feeling will ever leave me as we continue to raise Trevor and potentially expand our family in the future with other rounds of IVF.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://yeshtikva.org/about/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://yeshtikva.org/infertility-facts/>

As Talia Liben Yarmush wrote in an article on Kveller, a website dedicated to Jewish parenting, “I may be a mother, but I still suffer from infertility.”<sup>17</sup>

May these days of awe, reflection, forgiveness, and repentance remind us to not assume anyone’s journey. May these days inspire us to be a beacon of light for those in need of the warmth and glow it provides. May these days encourage thoughtfulness before we ask questions like “Do you have children?” or “When am I going to have grandchildren?” or “Are you planning on having children?” May these days reassure those struggling with infertility that this community is a place for them – a place of love and support, a place where their voices and cries are heard and understood. May these days open our ears to listen to the experiences of others and close our mouths to giving advice unless it is specifically requested. May these days enlighten our minds to the insensitivity in our community around infertility and the childless couple or person. And, may our prayers be heeded and strength given to us. Ken Yihi Ratzon. May this be God’s will!

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.kveller.com/as-a-mom-who-suffered-from-infertility-mothers-day-is-bittersweet/>