

Heart with No Companion

Rabbi Zac Kamenetz

Shabbat Rosh Hodesh Nissan 5779—April 6, 2019

Birshut HaKohen. Birshut HaMaharat. Birshut HaKahal. Birshut Shamayim.

I first want to extend my gratitude to our clergy, Rav Yonatan and Maharat Victoria for making Infertility Awareness Shabbat part of our communal culture and conversation in order to raise awareness and sensitivity for those currently experiencing infertility challenges in our shul, our extended families and friends, all of Am Yisrael, and all people, as well as those who continue to feel the effects of infertility, even after having a child.

I also want to thank Rabbi Idit Solomon for all her work through Hasidah to build awareness, connect people to support resources, and provides financial assistance for IVF. Your support is invaluable to so many, and as I commented on your Facebook page, without Hasidah, I would not be able to hold a daughter of my own. Finally, thank you to Ariel Wolgel who asked me to speak this morning and whose words were so touching.

As defined by the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, infertility is a disease of the reproductive system that impairs the body's ability to perform the basic function of reproduction, either by the inability to become pregnant or impregnate, or to carry a pregnancy to full term resulting in a miscarriage. As Ariel mentioned, one in eight people will experience some form of infertility in their lifetime. When both partners are under 35 with a normal functioning reproductive system, they only have a 20 to 25% chance of conceiving in any given month. After six months of trying, 60% of couples will conceive without medical assistance. The numbers are even lower for men and women over 40, and lower still for those over 45. Just as staggering, 15 to 25% of all pregnancies end in miscarriage. Thankfully, most infertility cases -- 85 to 90% -- are treated with conventional medical therapies such as medication or surgery. To say it plainly, and as the Maharat noted so well in an article published in the J this past week, fertility, conception, and a pregnancy that comes to full term should be considered nothing short of a miracle.

These statistics easily demonstrate that the biological disease of infertility, in different degrees of severity, is incredibly common, but it is the psychosocial aspects of this disease, the potential feelings of isolation, depression, and despair which make it difficult to speak about for those directly going through it. This is made even more challenging with feelings of unpreparedness by friends and family to adequately support their loved ones along the way. All of this together, I believe, leads us to avoid speaking infertility together, without shame, when it is so desperately needed.

In the late summer of 2014, just months after our incredibly joyous huppah, a luxurious honeymoon in Hawaii, and our first adventurous trip to Israel as a husband and wife, Jen and I learned that we were pregnant. We excitedly awaited our first prenatal appointment, but after

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the nurse couldn't find a heartbeat, and then the doctor was describing how the fetus had stopped growing and what the next steps were, I could not make out the meaning of the words—in that moment and even in this moment-- she was saying to us.

Over the year that followed, as we tried and failed to conceive naturally, we felt like we had no choice but to withdraw from many of our relationships, and stopped coming to shul regularly. Blessed with so many friends with so many beautiful children, blessed with a shul with so many growing families, blessed with being part of a religious tradition, which as Rabbi Yitz Greenberg says, celebrates the triumph of life over death, we were no longer able to live our lives as we had up to that point, and chose the safety of isolation over the vulnerability and pain of watching life go by us.

When it became painfully clear that we could not do this on our own--emotionally, spiritually, and financially--we reached out to our families, to Hasidah and other grant-giving organizations, and began the process of IVF treatment. After nearly two years of needles and medications, trips to our clinic, even on Shabbat and hagam, the terrible, terrible, waiting, and worst of all, a number of failed embryo transfers, we were fortunate to have a successful pregnancy, to give birth to our daughter Adi, and begin the long and still difficult process of healing, and trying to make sense of, to make meaning out of a suffering that seemed to have no bottom, and no purpose.

I'd like to pause for a moment in recognition of a dynamic that can go unspoken and only felt from those who are inside of it. As someone who has gone through this struggle, and come out the other side of it, even as the feelings and memories of the pain endured are still so palpable, there are those who are currently still in the painful center of the experience of infertility and now I am on the outside. Even though we share in a common experience with so much of the same depth and proportionality of pain, there is an unbridgeable gap between us. If you are currently experiencing infertility feeling that gap between us, I want you to know that I love, I support you, I see you, and I am so sorry you are going through this.

So what can we do for those currently experiencing infertility, knowing that everyone of us is different and needs different things, and those needs can change even in the course of a day? I'd like to give some concrete examples of way to actively engage with our friends, family, and community members, and behaviors we might *refrain from* to demonstrate our love, care, and concern for those going through difficult times.

- If everyone could please take a moment to look around at the people who are sitting close to them. If you notice that someone has stopped coming to shul for what seems

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like an extended period of time, I encourage you to reach out, check in, and see if there is anything they might need.

- The single most important thing we can do for people experiencing infertility is to let them know that we are thinking about them, in person, on the phone, an email, or a text.
- Ask them how things are going, and if they are able, to let you know about any next steps they are pursuing.
- Continue to ask them how you can support them in this moment. Even if you experience some degree of compassion fatigue, keep going.
- Ask them out to go do something...a movie, a drink, a hevruta.
- If it feels right, encourage them by reminding them that they are strong and resilient, and that they will get through this.
- If they tell you that they have had bad news, or you happen to see that they're visibly upset, you can say something like, "I'm so sorry you're going through this," or just say nothing and give them a physical indication of concern and support.
- Many who are experiencing infertility challenges have chosen competent medical teams and protocols. If you have medical advice, or recommendations for doctors or procedures, it's best to wait until they ask you for it than to dispense it freely.
- If you find out that you are pregnant while someone close to you is at some stage of their process, take an active and mindful role in how they find out about your pregnancy. Similarly, if you are having a difficult pregnancy or are challenged somehow by raising your children, it is skillful to share those experiences with friends who are not experiencing infertility.
- Since nobody can know the outcome of this struggle, it is important to refrain from saying things like, "There are many different ways to have a family", even with the best of intentions. Couples struggling with infertility usually begin by investing all sorts of resources into having their own biological child; reminding them that adoption is always a possibility undermines their efforts and resolve.
- Affirmations like "Just relax and it will happen" gloss over the myriad complex and painful ways infertility can impacted someone's life, and is based on junk science.
- While humor relieve tension in difficult spaces, I have not yet met anyone whose struggle with infertility is a funny topic, so joking about it in any way is not a good idea.

Finally, and as difficult as it for me to say it as a rabbi speaking from the bimah on Shabbat Rosh Hodesh Nisan, use this moment of pain and loss as a moment to embrace the kabbalistic idea of the hallal ha'panui, the space where the Kadosh Baruch Hu, withdrew, kivyachol, as it were, His presence from Creation, and in that absence, understand that there is no statement of faith or

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providence, a proof-text, questions about reward and punishment, that should be employed to shake one out of despair. The only answer to encounter this void, Rebbe Nachman teaches us, is with a song.

And so I'd like to conclude with a song from our teacher of blessed memory may his merit protect us, Eliezer ben Masha, Leonard Cohen.

Now I greet you from the other side of sorrow and despair, with a love so vast and so shattered, it will reach you everywhere.

And I sing this for the captain whose ship has not been built, for the mother in confusion, her cradle still unfilled.

For the heart with no companion, for the soul without a king. for the prima ballerina who cannot dance to anything.

Through the days of shame that are coming, through the nights of wild distress, though your promise count for nothing, you must keep it nonetheless.

You must keep it for the captain whose ship has not been built. for the mother in confusion her cradle still unfilled.

For the heart with no companion, for the soul without a king, for the prima ballerina who cannot dance to anything.

Now I greet you from the other side of sorrow and despair, with a love so vast and so shattered, it will reach you everywhere.

God, please open the inner gate. Please open the inner gate.