



When Pregnancy Ends in Loss

You are here reading this. This is good because it means you recognize the need to mourn and take care of yourself. Pregnancy loss is complicated and just about anything you might be feeling right now is normal. While there is no shame in pregnancy loss, it is private. You may want to talk about your experience and you may not. And tomorrow that might not be the case.

Pregnancy loss is a process, not a moment. These resources are here to help you understand a little more about what you might be experiencing and how Judaism and the Jewish community can be a support to you. Ultimately, you need to take the time you need for your spiritual and emotional healing. We hope the resources can support you along that journey.

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1. Jewish Mourning and Miscarriage

By Rabbi Jill Cozen-Harel

I had a miscarriage this summer — and it broke me in more ways than I could have imagined. At my nine-week appointment, I discovered, to my complete surprise, that I was experiencing a “missed abortion” - a pregnancy loss in which I’d had [no miscarriage symptoms whatsoever](#). Not only did I have to make medical decisions while in shock, but I also struggled intensely to make sense of what I was feeling emotionally and spiritually.

With help, I recognized that I was deep in the throes of grief. Jewish tradition provides an [incredible structure for mourners to grieve the death of a loved one](#). Yet nothing is prescribed for my miscarriage grief. When grieving, it can be harder to make any decision, large or small. I craved a prescription for what to do; that might have left me with fewer heart-wrenching decisions.

Nonetheless, I found healing and comfort in adapting Jewish rituals and traditions.

In honor of October being Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month, here are some of the lessons I learned:



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1. **Jewish tradition teaches that we are not obligated to mourn a miscarriage or even the death of a baby who lives less than 30 days.** In fact, we are taught that up through 40 days after conception (this would be just under 8 weeks pregnant in today's terms, since counting begins at the woman's last period, not at conception), the embryo is considered to be merely water (Yevamot 69b). This does not describe the emotional reality of many pregnant women or couples. Even in those early weeks, the connection to the embryo can be incredibly deep. And yet I recognize that mourning a miscarriage is not the same as mourning the death of a child or an adult. I didn't lose a baby that I'd held. I didn't even lose a fetus. I lost an embryo (the transition from embryo to fetus happens in the 11th week), but that embryo was supposed to make me a mother. That embryo was supposed to grow into a fetus. I would have delivered a baby, named and held my child. That embryo had a due date. I had a timeframe sketched out already for when I would start looking at daycare options.
2. **The specific grief of a miscarriage is different but still very real.** In order to cope with my grief, I needed to mourn. The ancient rabbis likely believed that having a prescribed set of mourning rituals for a miscarriage may have been a burden, since families could experience multiple miscarriages.

Today, too, families may experience one or more miscarriages. While miscarriage rates may or may not have changed since rabbinic times, many things have changed: birth control has led to less pregnancies; at-home pregnancy tests help women find out that they are pregnant much earlier than even several decades ago; because of ultrasound technology, pregnancies feel much more "real" when a future parent sees an embryo or a flickering heartbeat at a fairly early stage. All of this leads to pregnant people (and their partners, if applicable) who are more likely to experience grief when losing a pregnancy. The Perinatal Grief Scale was developed in 1988 to help clinicians diagnose and care for their patients' grief. What if certain rituals of mourning were opportunities to grieve, instead of a potentially weighty obligation placed on the family? Michael I. Norton and Francesca Gino, faculty at [Harvard Business School](#), conducted experiments to measure the impact of mourning rituals. They determined that rituals are incredibly effective in reducing grief because they allow mourners to regain a sense of control, at a time when it feels like they have lost any semblance of control of their world. For me, rituals like burial and [mikveh](#) also helped me find a sense of validity in my grief. I needed concrete physical acts that also stemmed from Jewish tradition to help me recognize that my loss was real and mattered, both in my own eyes, and perhaps more importantly, in the eyes of Jewish tradition.

3. **Rituals may be traditionally absent, but Jewish rituals, modified from other contexts, are emerging.** Not everyone marks time and life cycle through Jewish liturgy and ritual, but I do. Each person will find what is meaningful for them in coping with a miscarriage. In the first few days, I felt compelled to have a way to externalize my pain. ^{[[LIL]]}_{[[SEP]]}When an immediate relative dies, the [mourner tears their clothes or wears a kriyah ribbon](#). I chose to let my nail polish chip away naturally over the coming weeks instead of taking it off my fingernails once it started to chip. I looked unkempt and that felt appropriate. People should



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know that something was awry. I whispered kaddish once while tears streamed down my face - it felt both rebellious and cathartic. I realized that I needed a burial of sorts, echoing how we address a loved one who has died.

With the help of [Sinai Memorial Chapel](#), I arranged to bury my embryo, unmarked, near newly planted trees in a cemetery. I chose not to be present for it, but it was comforting to know that it was returned to the earth. I also visited the site a few weeks later with a friend and buried a piece of paper on which I'd written my due date, and some other dates that would no longer be shared with this baby - I had envisioned a baby costume for this Purim, and had imagined that this Passover would be my first as a parent. None of this was halachically prescribed or encouraged but these acts helped me say goodbye.

Some new Jewish rituals for mourning a miscarriage suggest planting a sapling. But for me, this didn't seem fitting. A sapling would grow into a larger plant, but my baby-that-should-have-been was never going to grow. While I yearned to one day be able to grow a different pregnancy, that wasn't what I wanted out of this ritual. I needed a ritual that was solely about loss before I could begin to think about new life again.

4. **The cultural norm is to keep the pregnancy quiet through the first semester — but that's not always helpful.** Miscarriages are common, but it feels incredibly lonely.* The Jewish community has a superstitious relationship to the evil eye: if you tell others about your blessing (of pregnancy), the evil eye might overhear and change your luck. Soon after the first trimester, you start to show, and the secret is out, so the concern about the evil eye lessens a bit then. When I miscarried, only a small group of people knew about my pregnancy. How could my tight-knit Jewish community support me through this trauma when only a handful of people knew that I was pregnant? We have been trained to not publicly reveal pregnancies until we are past the first trimester, and yet that first trimester is when [75-80% of miscarriages occur](#). And they happen more than we realize. 20-30% of pregnancies end in a miscarriage, and the statistics only increase as women continue to have children into their late 30s, 40s, and beyond. On the one hand, the more people you tell about your pregnancy, the more people you feel like you need to 'un-tell' should you, God forbid, miscarry. On the other hand, those people are the ones who can hold you - feed you, check in on you, and let you fall apart with them.

When I did tell people who didn't know that I had been pregnant, I had to tell them three secrets at once: (a) I decided to try to become a parent (b) I had been elated that I got pregnant (c) I am now crushed because I had a miscarriage and now I need you to be gentle with me. Sharing pregnancy news – whether about a new pregnancy or a pregnancy loss – is an incredibly vulnerable act. Don't be too afraid of letting people know before you cross the first-trimester finish line, if those people would not only celebrate with you but also support you through your fears or even a loss. Let's change the stigma around revealing a pregnancy while it is still uncertain. The uncertainty doesn't go away entirely until you hold a baby in your arms.

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5. **A miscarriage is related to, but not identical to, infertility.** Trying to get pregnant again may feel intensely different than before. For weeks, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd done something to cause this, even though I was reassured again and again that running too much or taking a reeye or that sip of coffee would not cause me to miscarry. People told me that it was a good sign that I was able to get pregnant. While there might be medical truth to that, as much as I wanted reassurance that I would eventually, God willing, be able to carry a pregnancy to term, I need to mourn this particular loss - this particular baby-to-be that I carried and would never become a baby that I could hold in my arms. I went to the [mikveh](#) before I tried again, so that I could acknowledge that my body, which was supposed to create life, had in fact held a sort of death. I needed to immerse and wash that away in order to be ready for new life again.
6. **A miscarriage is not (always) the same as being sick.** My mental and spiritual health were compromised, but thankfully, in my particular situation, I was never worried about my physical well-being. This may not be true for other women, but I did not want to *bensch gomel* (a call-and-response moment during an aliyah to the Torah, often said when you survive a potentially life-threatening experience) both because of this gratitude for my health throughout and because I was not sure that I wanted to acknowledge my miscarriage quite so publicly. I associate gomel with surviving in the face of fear, but I had not been afraid. Instead, I had been devastatingly sad.
7. **When in shock and grief, decisions are exponentially harder.** Prescribed rituals or other things to do or not to do can help you move through that. When an immediate family member dies, Jewish tradition prescribes very specific and concrete changes in order to grieve the life lost. I have been working on compiling resources for rabbinic colleagues to help their communities mourn miscarriages, perinatal losses, and neonatal deaths, but there isn't a definitive set of do's and don'ts. In the midst of what can be a deeply chaotic and heart-wrenching experience, rabbis can help by developing a concrete set of ways to mourn. Had I been steered toward taking several days to fully grieve in a way that parallels shiva, I believe that I would have healed more easily.

Grieving my pregnancy loss was incredibly challenging. And yet, a foundation in traditional Jewish mourning rituals eventually helped me find ways to adapt them that felt honest and appropriate for miscarriage. As I moved through each day, I also found myself experiencing deep, profound gratitude for the people in my life who showed up for me over and over again.

May we find ways to cushion the pain of pregnancy losses with community, ritual, and tradition.

This article originally appeared in [The Forward](#): How Jewish Rituals Helped Me Mourn My Miscarriage, October 25, 2019. Rabbi [Jill Cozen-Harel](#) teaches and provides pastoral care throughout the Bay Area.



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2. Jewish Resources for Pregnancy Loss

[NechamaComfort](#) – Jewish support groups and counseling

[Pregnancy Loss Support Program \(PLSP\) for Miscarriage, Stillbirth, and Newborn Death](#). Phone line and information

[BimBam: Creating a Funeral after Miscarriage](#) – video guide

[A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort, 2nd Edition](#): Guide to Confronting the Loss of a Baby: A Personal and Jewish

[Confronting the Loss of a Baby](#) by Rabbi Yamin Levy (KTAV Publishing House, 1998).

[Talking to God: Personal Prayers for Times of Joy, Sadness, Struggle and Celebration](#) by Naomi Levy (Image, 2003)

[Tears of Sorrow, Seeds of Hope, 2nd Edition](#): A Jewish Spiritual Companion for Infertility and Pregnancy Loss. Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin.

[To Mourn a Child](#): Jewish Responses to Neonatal and Childhood Death. Jeffrey Saks and Joel Wolowelsky (editors).

3. Other Resources for Pregnancy Loss

Below is a brief list of on-line readings that encompass many of the general aspects of miscarriage. They are not specifically Jewish in nature, they are human. Yet they the value of compassion, the need for mourning, and the importance of *hesed* – loving-kindness - that Judaism knows to be needed during difficult times.

- [Help After Neonatal Loss](#) (H.A.N.D.) - (650) 579-0350 or toll-free (888) 220-7575. H.A.N.D. holds [support groups](#) in San Francisco, on the Peninsula, and in Santa Cruz (650) 367-6993 or info@HANDsupport.org
- [A Silent Sorrow: Pregnancy Loss – 2nd Edition](#) by Ingrid Kohn and Perry-Lynn Moffit (Routledge, 2000).
- [What to expect with miscarriage grief](#)
- [A personal experience](#) – a person story about trying to work through feelings about miscarriage
- [Multiple Miscarriages](#) - When this isn't the first time
- [Self-care](#) – Coping with miscarriage



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4. To Share with Your Friends and Loved Ones

[What to say](#) – Ten things to say to someone experiencing a miscarriage

[What not to say](#) - Ten things someone should never say to someone experiencing a miscarriage