

How to Cope During the High Holidays

Facing Tefillah, Community, and Family as a Couple Struggling with Fertility

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[Jewish Holidays](#), [Support Resources](#) [Holidays](#), [Rosh Hashanah](#)

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is a time of reflection, a time of spirituality. For many people, *tefillah*, community and family feel like a warm embrace. To others, such as those experiencing infertility, these can feel more like a straight jacket.



I always ask my patients about their religious affiliation. Religion can be a tremendous comfort when someone is in pain, but it can also be a stressor. During the *chaggim*, it can be both to the couple experiencing infertility. If you are in this position, please try to understand how you feel, what you think the experience will be like for you this year and discuss with your spouse some strategies to assist you during this time of year.

First, let us set the scene: The *davening* during the High Holy Days has many images and themes. It discusses G-d as King; a G-d who is slow to anger, full of mercy and compassion. But it also speaks of a G-d who is deciding, “Who will live, and who will die...who will be born and who will perish.” The language used in our prayers can evoke strong feelings.

Communities spend more time together in *shul* at this time of year than at any other time. But with packed *shuls*, and often assigned seats, the couple experiencing a difficult personal time often feels crowded and overwhelmed. Young children and pregnant women seem to be everywhere, parents revel in bringing young children in for *shofar* blowing, and babies are passed from relative to relative. All of this can serve as powerful emotional triggers.

Lastly, family gatherings are often part of the *yom tov* season. Some families are very sensitive to members who are struggling with infertility, and some are not. Some couples have shared their fertility struggles with their families, and some have not. Intrusive questions, whether well-meaning or not, can ruin a holiday for a couple. The same can be said when families seem to only focus on children and not on the adults at the gathering. Many clients of mine have related how they feel that their parents “only care about the grandchildren,” and so even though they are expected to attend, it does not seem as though they are important as well.

What are some suggestions for the couple who is struggling with infertility to get the most out of the holiday experience and minimize painful experiences?

Family:

1. Talk with your spouse about how much to disclose to family members. Decide what you will share and what you will not share BEFORE you are with the family.



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2. Remember there is an inverse relationship between privacy and support. The more privacy you have, the less support you may receive. Decide together where the line is with each family member. If you both feel someone will be a big support to you, consider sharing with them your experiences.
3. In these pre-*chaggim* discussions with your spouse, be honest about family members with each other. Not every family member is the same. If one of you does not feel comfortable sharing with someone, respect each other's feelings.
4. If you are with family that can be intrusive, come up with some phrases that you can repeat throughout the holiday. "Thank you for asking. We have decided to keep that private for now." "We will let you know when there is something to know but have decided to keep the details of treatment to ourselves." "Thank you for caring, but it's not something I am comfortable talking about right now."
5. Know your limits. Create a signal between you and your spouse so that when you have reached your fill, you can take a break and leave the environment. You can take a walk, read a book or separate yourself in another room.
6. Discuss with your spouse where you want to spend *yom tov*. What do you need as a couple now? What do you want to do for the *chaggim* THIS year. It does not have to be a permanent plan.
7. Try to make sure that you cope together. Couples struggling with fertility are generally newer couples, couples who are still finding their way in each other's extended families. Make sure you turn towards each other, not away.

Shul:

1. Distractions: For some people, it is hard to concentrate, to have *kavanah*, when they have little children or a pregnant person in their line of sight. You can often move to the wall and stand and have some private time to *daven* off to the side.
2. Change of *minyán*: There are times that you are better off in a different environment. Some *minyanim* seem to be more "family-oriented"; this may not be the *minyán* you chose to go to this year.
3. Plan ahead: Know yourself. If you do not want to stand "catching up" with everyone after *tefillah*, make a plan with your spouse or another family member or by yourself to leave as soon as services are over. If you plan it ahead of time, it can reduce the anxiety through *shul* that you will have to make small talk, and if others know you are leaving right away, it reduces the need to find them and tell them where you are going. Make a plan that "We will meet at home."

Machzor:

1. Take some time in this month of Elul to look through the *tefillot*. Even though it is familiar to you, you may be in a different place emotionally and spiritually this year; spending some time with the *machzor* ahead of time can help reduce the emotions of the words that poke at your wounds.



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2. Try to find the images and the words that bring comfort to you, words that help you relate to this experience so that they will stand out when you are saying them in *shul*. For example, is the image of “G-d as King” or “G-d as a caring Father” more helpful to you this year such that you want to make sure you focus on the verses that contain that image? You can use sticky note flags or mark those passages so that they envelop you during services.
3. Spend some time with the more challenging images ahead of *yomtov*. What do they mean to you? How can you relate to them this year? How do they contribute to your relationship with G-d, and how do you talk to G-d about that? The conversation with G-d can begin at home, in a quiet room, just you and a *machzor*, and can continue through *yom tov*. While Rosh Hashanah is a two-day holiday, and *Tishrei* is a month-long, ideally we are in a lifelong conversation and relationship with G-d.
4. Consider your resources: Some of the words and images may be difficult. Images of “barrenness” and of judgement are particularly jarring. If you have a relationship with a religious leader or current or former teacher, consider meeting together privately beforehand to discuss it if you think this can help.

Overall, you will have your own strategies and methods for coping with the holidays. Be thoughtful about who you and your spouse are, and what strategies work well for you and what does not. Know your limits and what you can change and what you cannot. Most of all, in the spirit of Yom Kippur and forgiveness, forgive yourself. Forgive yourself for having complicated emotions and sensitivities. Be kind to yourself and take care of yourself, as an individual and as a couple.

Shana Tova Umtuka

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