

**A Name for Ourselves:
On Infertility, Struggle, Pain and the Meaning of Life**
(Essay as it appears in the Union for Reform Judaism's
Bioethics Study Guide on Infertility, Fall 1999)

**Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach
Temple Beth Am, Buffalo, NY**

Item: Our neighbor had a baby boy last week. All along, she said it would be really "convenient" if she gave birth on a particular weekend. How it would fit into her family's schedule, and be best for her other three kids. Along comes the day she wanted to have the baby and... sure enough... All this predictive power from a woman who never took more than a single month to get pregnant.

We like our neighbor a great deal. She is a wonderful parent. She is a personal friend. But I don't think she knows just how fortunate she is. There is a nightmare of the soul she has been spared.

Item: An Orthodox couple has been married for a year. A full month before their anniversary, at eleven months, people they barely know begin approaching them. "You know, I've got a doctor... he's very discreet." "If you are having trouble, there are people who could help..." All this interest -- nay, all this interference -- because they had no news to share... eleven months after their marriage.

We place so *much* emphasis in the Jewish world on how to raise children. Sometimes we forget how hard it is to have them in the first place. We forget about the miracle of life... and the devastating pain when life follows not our dreams and hopes and plans, but its own.

There are so very many dimensions to the issue of infertility. Married couples who cannot conceive. Singles searching for partners, who yearn for children nonetheless. Gays and lesbians in committed relationships who would make wonderful parents if only they and the world could agree on a way. There are the too common tales of medical hoops, invasive procedures, intimacy set by the clock and not the heart. The monthly wait. The horrible trauma when we hear the beat of life at last... and it does not hold.

In the midst of all the shots and injections, turkey basters and chemical experiments, in reducing love to statistics and hope to numbers on a page, still and all, in between the charts, in the corner of the page, a couple lurks, real human beings, in the midst of a deeply spiritual struggle, facing, perhaps, the most important issues of their lives.

Our own story has a happy ending. So many others do not. I write now as my two beautiful young boys lie asleep upstairs. But for years I never knew if I would ever be able to write those words. What my wife and I went through was only a minor touch of pain relative to what others have gone through, a single tear in an ocean of agony. I share it nonetheless, in the hope that somehow it is of help, or evokes an echo of memory for those who traveled on the same road.

We were lucky, by comparison. All we needed were multiple surgeries. And a bit of luck. But every now and then I remember what it was like, to think it might not work out. And how deeply empty I felt.

It began with a TV show. Shortly after our marriage I had been diagnosed with a varicocele, but was told it was “no big deal,” that on rare occasion it could affect fertility, but that I should not worry about it. So I didn’t. Until years later, and several months after my wife and I began trying to conceive, when watching an episode of *Northern Exposure*, in which one of the characters was unable to conceive because of a varicocele. I called a urologist the next day.

For men or for women, although in different ways, infertility workups are uncomfortable -- and embarrassing. You come to walk in a new world, to learn a new language, of “motility” and mucous, home kits and calculators. In our case, we discovered that I needed surgery, which I scheduled, went through in the small city in which we lived at the time, recovered, squirmed, suffered, stewed, switched urologists -- and discovered a recurrence of the varicocele. The surgery had failed.

It is said that, no matter the subject, you need to be your own best advocate in the medical world of today. Physicians may not like it, or look longingly back to the days of reverential deference and near omnipotence, but doctors don’t always know best. I had trusted the first physician I went to, not done enough research, and not discovered, until later, that there was a significantly newer procedure which used a laser and a microscope (a “microsurgical” approach), had a much quicker recovery -- and a much, *much* lower rate of recurrence. The younger urologist in our small city was developing an expertise in the newer procedure, but I had had enough; we went to New York City, to the physician who invented the microsurgical repair. We read his articles with a medical dictionary in hand, met with him, checked references. I went through a second surgery -- and my wife was pregnant six months later.

I was cured! I was ecstatic! I was happier than I had ever been in my life. I never saw the miscarriage coming.

It was hard in other ways as well. The miscarriage couldn’t have come at a worse time: my wife was out of town. It happened two days before Rosh Hashanah... and at her newest nephew’s *brit milah* (circumcision) ceremony.

She never made it back for the holiday. I couldn’t go to her. (Frankly, rabbi of a solo pulpit or not, that was one of the greatest mistakes of my life. I should have been on a plane the moment I heard. The High Holy Days would have happened without me. *Someone* could have led the service.)

When she did return, we began the same round of confusion and medical cacophony we had just finished with me. No local docs this time, though. Off we went to the Cleveland Clinic, one of the best treatment centers in the world, the moment the post-miscarriage sonogram discovered her cysts.

Let me be blunt. A local ob-gyn says: “well, we *might* be able to save the ovary, but I doubt it. Hey, you’ve got another one.” A specialist in another city

says: "I've never had to take an ovary out for *that*." It's kind of a no brainer. (Jews have a reputation for being pushy. I don't like being pushy. But we might have our children's lives to thank for doing more than listening and trusting.)

Julie had laparoscopic surgery in December 1994. They discovered several cysts, extensive endometriosis, and one fibroid. They removed the cysts, cleaned up the endometriosis, and left the fibroid right where it was. We conceived again in April. The second miscarriage came in June.

People mean so well when they try to offer comfort. And I am pro-choice: I do not believe that a twelve-week old fetus is really a person. But comments like "it's nature's way" were excruciatingly unhelpful. And a part of me died that day.

(Again, being a rabbi was intertwined with my family life. Julie began spotting in the morning. We were at a reception for a baby naming -- the child of close friends. Maybe it was made a tad easier because this baby was adopted, and this couple "had been there." But we knew what was coming. It was agony to wait. The next morning I had a funeral. So off I went. By the time I got home, the miscarriage was beginning. At least we were together afterwards, this time.)

One miscarriage is "normal." I was shocked to learn just how common they were -- from friends and older relatives who shared stories I had never heard. Three miscarriages puts you into a different category. Two is... who knows?

Now the workups began in earnest: blood work, hormones, enzymes. Finally we found, well, *something*: a positive test for an anti-cardiolipin antibody, theoretically linked to a condition known as anti-phospholipid antibody syndrome.

That summer we went to a specialist in Connecticut at the cutting edge of rheumatology, who tried to determine whether Julie had this syndrome. It puts mother and fetus at risk for thrombosis -- major blood clots. Did Julie have it? Well, maybe. We just don't know. Let's monitor this, and do more tests. Lots of tests and lots of speculation later I have come to my own conclusion: sometimes a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. The best scientific explanation anyone can come up with is: looks like she gets weird results on blood work.

By the fall of 1995 we were immersed in the world of infertility. We checked out web sites, E-mail discussion groups, Resolve. On Rosh Hashanah of that year, one year after Julie's first miscarriage, I preached about healing and hope. It was the hardest talk I ever gave.

But by then I was noticing other things as well. The women who got up and left before the Haftarah reading on Rosh Hashanah (the one about Hannah praying for children, and being Arewarded@ by the birth of Samuel). Couples in the congregation who cry instead of smile at baby namings. The number of adopted children or adoptive parents: higher than I had ever realized. That pain is all around, in a child-centered world.

Everyone has a story. And each person's pain is his or her own. I realized that in the midst of a horrid pity party with my sister-in-law, whose nephew (the one at whose *bris* Julie had her miscarriage) was, at age *one*, diagnosed with

diabetes. She kept acting as if what we were going through was just temporary, while she had a child with a permanent problem. We, not knowing what lay ahead, kept acting as if, hey, at least she *had* children. We just couldn't see the world through each other's' eyes. Everyone's pain is their own.

But if we open our eyes, we are not alone. Healing came from eyes and ears and arms: to see the pain of others. To hear their stories. To hold and be held, when hope was almost gone.

Namings were the hardest thing, until our children were born. I managed, I believe, to be genuinely joyful, for most of the time, for each and every naming that I did. After all, it's not like "they" got "our" baby. There is something profound... about giving a name to another human being.

Long ago, in a city far away, there were those whose goal it was to make a name. "Let us make for us a name," said the builders of Babel, "lest we be scattered over the face of the earth." It was a natural desire, for impact, for immortality, for meaning that flows from who others think we are.

Sometimes, our hopes and dreams fall from the heights. The tower crashes. We are dazed and "*mevubal*" (the same Hebrew root as Babel); we are dazed and confused. We look at each other and do not understand. We cannot explain. We lack the language, we want for words.

Slowly, painfully, we come to a new understanding. It is this. Before we can say how others will see us, we must secure the way we see ourselves. With children or without, we have a task we too often overlook. Should we choose to have children, and be able to do so, still, before we can name another, we must know who we are. Whether or not we pass a name on, we must look in the mirror -- and name ourselves.

Children may come from inside our bodies, or be adopted from others. They are a part of us, and learn to grow apart from us.

But meaning flows from inside out. Not the other way around.

When I saw nothing more than waiting, I ached with emptiness.

To fill that void was my own spiritual task.

We are blessed. Children came. They fill my heart, and my soul, and my schedule.

But there are those who come face to face with that emptiness though their families be large and quickly built. And so I come to learn that, with children or without, the task is still the same. To fill the void. To answer the emptiness with the essence of who we are. Woven into the lives of those around us -- but not existentially dependent upon them. Alone, but not alone at all.