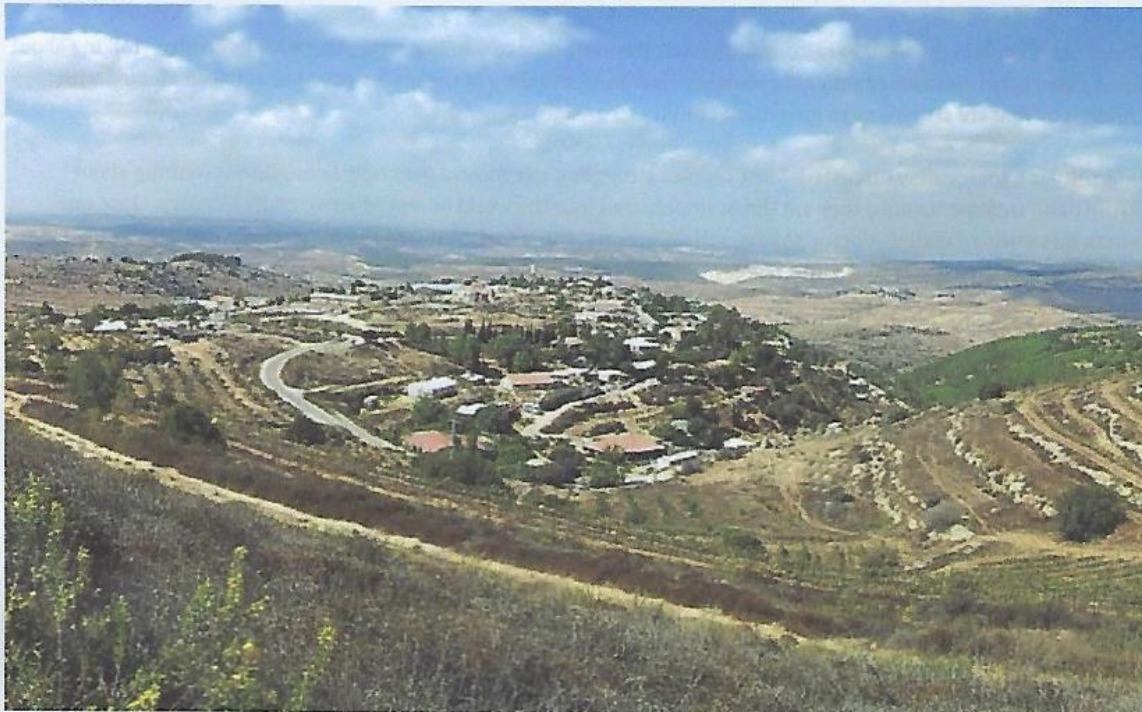


## On This Chag Open Your Hearts To Infertility Challenged Couples

We call on Rabbis and their communities to open a sincere discussion on how we can be inclusive of fertility challenged couples.

By DR. KAREN FRIEDMAN

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"Bat Ayin, Gush Etzion" Wikimedia Commons

A young couple applied to join a Yishuv and build their lives there. The Yishuv was beautiful, with the right community, a warm atmosphere, and great values. When the committee chose not to accept the couple, they were bitterly disappointed. In standard Israeli discourse, acceptance to a community is usually based on common ideological, religious and national issues. Communities usually won't accept people who do not meld with their character and identity. However in this particular case, none of these issues was relevant. The couple was rejected due to an unspoken tension, prevalent but hidden behind closed doors: the tension surrounding fertility challenged couples.

In this regrettable true case, the couple was refused because they were childless. The answer given, without apology, was that the Yishuv's priority is to accept couples with children.

*"The couple was rejected due to an unspoken tension, prevalent but hidden behind closed doors: the tension surrounding fertility challenged couples."*

Imagine being married for five years while undergoing fertility treatments. The physiological difficulty of not being able to bring children into the world has now defined the couple as handicapped, as a pariah, unwelcome to join the community they chose. What can be crueler?

Acceptance of fertility challenged couples into Jewish communities is not talked about. This exacts a high toll on many. According to Israeli and American statistics, one out of every eight couples is fertility challenged and may be subject to exclusion.

The next story is about a woman who participated in “Gefen Mind-Body Fertility” therapy group, which was geared specifically for ultra-orthodox women. Saraleh (pseudonym) burst out in a painful cry: “I will never in my life attend another Brit Mila.” When asked to explain she answered haltingly: “I wanted the ground to swallow me. Everyone stared at my husband and me with overwhelming pity. I come from a family of 10 and my husband is one of 12. We attend many Britot and in every one of them we are invited to be a ‘Kvatar’ (one who carries the baby). They mean well. It is believed to help us to overcome our infertility. But it is so humiliating.” Then Chava, another member of the group, responded, “But if you are not a Kvatar you won’t have a segula, and we need all the segulot to have children.”

Here Sarala is faced with the dilemma: If she does not fulfill the role of Kvatar, she will feel guilty, and if she does she will bear endless shame. Is there a solution?

*“ I wanted the ground to swallow me. Everyone stared at my husband and me with overwhelming pity.”*

These cases explain the need to raise awareness of the hardships of families struggling with infertility. Talking about these cases helps enhance communal awareness and understanding of those who have not yet been blessed with children or who are struggling to grow their families.

Infertility is a topic rarely discussed. Most couples struggling to conceive generally know almost nothing about fertility and treatments until they are thrust unprepared into the world of reproductive endocrinology. Once one enters this world of endless doctor’s visits, self-injections, and failed cycles, the sadness, cyclical disappointment, and shame can drive individuals into secrecy.

Struggling to have a child, be it one’s first or any subsequent child, can create a constant feeling of loss and helplessness. Taking the first step on this journey can be frightening and anxiety provoking. Embarking on this road is acknowledging that something may be wrong. Deciding to seek intervention is a brave step into an unfamiliar world with no guarantee of success.

According to studies, patients with an infertility diagnosis suffered from depression and anxiety on levels equal to those with life threatening illnesses including cancer, heart disease, and hypertension. The inability to conceive creates feelings of loss, similar to a lost pregnancy. But one of the biggest challenges that couples face when they struggle to conceive is loneliness — the feelings that they’re the only ones going through it can be hard to bear.

As a Jew, there is an added stress to infertility. Many of the Jewish holidays and rituals revolve around children. For those trying to conceive, holiday time can be very difficult, even a source of tremendous pain, as a reminder of what they desperately want. Celebrating a brit or simchat bat is a joyous occasion, but for every baby born, there are those torn between happiness for the new parents and despair for their own inability to conceive.

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Those who experience infertility often feel, at some point, like social outsiders, particularly in the family- and child-centered Jewish community. At best, they slip through the cracks; at worst, they endure many insensitive questions and comments from those who do not understand.

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**Dr. Karen Friedman** is the founding director of The Gefen Mind-Body Fertility Organization in Jerusalem which provides emotional and wellness support for fertility-challenged women at minimal cost.

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