

OPEN YOUR HEARTS TO FERTILITY-CHALLENGED COUPLES

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BY KAREN FRIEDMAN APRIL 10, 2019 23:28

A young couple applied to join a yishuv and build their lives there. The yishuv was beautiful, the right community, warm atmosphere, great values. When the committee chose not to accept them, they were bitterly disappointed.

In standard Israeli discourse, acceptance to a community is usually based on common ideological, religious and national issues. Communities usually will not accept applicants 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.

Imagine being married for five years while undergoing fertility treatment. The physiological difficulty of not being able to bring

children into the world has now defined the couple as handicapped, two pariahs, unwelcome to join the community they chose. What could be crueler?

Acceptance of fertility-challenged couples by the community 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, geared specifically for ultra-Orthodox women. Saraleh (pseudonym) burst out in a painful cry: “I will never in my life attend another brit mila [circumcision].” 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 every time we are asked to be a qvater [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 qvater, you won’t have a segula [good luck], and we need all the segulot to have children.”

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

These cases explain the need to raise awareness of the hardships of families struggling with infertility.

GEFEN MIND-BODY Fertility Organization and Midreshet Nishmat have partnered with Yesh Tikva’s 4th Annual Infertility Awareness Shabbat, aimed at raising awareness of and sensitivity toward infertility in our communities. On Shabbat morning, April 6, Rosh

Hodesh Nisan, over 300 synagogues in the US and Israel will share a message or d'var Torah (Torah insight) that 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 publicly. Most couples struggling to conceive generally know almost nothing about fertility and treatments until being thrust unprepared into the world of reproductive endocrinology. After entering this world of endless doctors' visits, self-injections and failed cycles, the sadness, cyclical disappointment and shame can drive individuals into secrecy.

Struggling to have a child, be it the first or any subsequent child, can create a constant feeling of loss and helplessness. Embarking on this road of fertility treatments 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 suffer from depression and anxiety on levels equal to those with life-threatening illnesses, including cancer, heart disease and hypertension. The inability to conceive can create 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 feeling that you're the only one 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 (girl's naming ceremony) 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.

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.

On this Shabbat, we call on rabbis and their communities to open a sincere discussion on how we can be inclusive of fertility-challenged couples.

Karen Friedman is the founding director of The Gefen Mind-Body Fertility Organization, providing psychological and emotional support for fertility-challenged women at minimal cost.