

Rabbi Schulman:

One balmy Sunday in May of 2013, I ascended the bimah of my home synagogue to stand underneath the chuppah alongside my best friend. On that day, in that sacred space, Matthew and I uttered a single promise to each other – that we would hold the other as sacred. We had been together five years before getting married, and had experienced five years' worth of ups and downs; from losses of beloved family members, to navigating not one, but two parents' battles with cancer, to the regular old day-to-day stresses of being alive. Since then, we have been blessed with a happy and healthy five years of marriage, but they did not unfold exactly as we had imagined that they would.

Newly wed and newly ordained, we moved to the Bay Area where I took my first rabbinic position. Matthew and I knew that we did not want to jump into having children right away; with the move to a new city, the shift of career for him and the launching of one for me, and the adoption of a second dog (because why not?), we were happy to wait a while — although we knew without a doubt that we wanted to be parents. During that first year, one of my clergy colleagues had a baby. Around the time of our first anniversary, we began to seriously consider getting started with our own process, when another colleague announced that she was expecting. Inspired by the growing families around us, we decided that there was no moment like the present, and that at 32 & 33, it was time for us to get cracking.

Months passed by, and as they did, we celebrated the arrival of two new nephews, and rejoiced as countless of our friends welcomed babies of their own. And yet, for us, that celebration turned to disappointment as month after month turned into year after year of heartache. After one year, the word “infertility,” became a dark cloud over our heads as we began to more aggressively pursue alternate means of becoming parents. Mother's Day and Father's Day became dreaded dates on the calendar. Baby showers, too, became unbearable. Friendships became strained and I stopped spending time and communicating with life-long friends who were in the throes of young parenthood in an attempt to cushion my broken heart from further envy, anguish and despair.

Alienated from family and friends, and isolated even from Matthew at times – for whom the struggle was also real – quite inevitably led to depression, and internal doubt of my self worth. Why couldn't my body do this thing that it was supposed to do? Had I brought this on myself? What in my medical past had caused this? Who was to blame? The answers to these questions, often arose from the darkest of places, and only served to further damage my relationship to myself and the world around me. Well-intended questions from friends, family and congregants about our plans to start a family became more and more difficult to evade. Until finally, I began to answer them honestly. That yes, we did indeed want children, and yes, we had been trying for a while now, struggling to find the sense of holiness that we had promised each other under the chuppah, amidst the doctor's visits and pills and needles and herbs and tests and tears and waiting.

Rabbi Meyer:

When a rabbi is too detached, they lack the warmth and intimacy that should be a part of life's biggest moments, both joyous and heartbreaking. If we become too emotional, we can't effectively guide celebrants and mourners in the rituals of Jewish tradition. This became an impossible line to hold some three years ago when I stood beside some of my favorite people, Nick Barrat and Tal Lev, in the chapel just across the way. Emily and I were privileged to have

celebrated with them at their wedding, which made it all the more special to participate in welcoming Shai, their firstborn son, into the covenant of the Jewish people.

Internally, I was a mess. I was so happy for them...and so anxious about the prospect of having children of my own. A consummate planner, I had long ago convinced Emily to wait for everything to be just right. We waited to begin trying until we had enough money saved up and set aside. We waited until the timing was going to perfectly comport with the lives of a two rabbi household. We thought everything was perfect, but it turns out there some some areas in life where practice just doesn't make perfect.

When months turned into years we realized it was time to call in the professionals. Emily and I explored adoption and read extensively about the experience of being foster parents. We debated surrogacy and joked about turkey basters and learned more about intra-uterine insemination and in vitro fertilization than we knew about Talmud. And when we finally chose the path of assisted reproductive technology, I was hopeful we would welcome a baby into this world.

Multiple miscarriages later, I had lost a considerable amount of that hope. Our marriage was strong but tested by daily hormone injections and self-doubt, feelings of failure and a sinking feeling that we had gambled away tens of thousands of dollars for naught. I was ready to start "plan c" when Emily said that early indications were positive and we were again pregnant.

And so it was that I was a mess when we entered Chapel. Love for my friends and their new baby boy alone would have brought me to tears that day; the unwanted intrusion of my personal life did. I was far from my professional best, though fortunately I was only sharing the blessings and Dr. Witz retained, as always, a steady hand. Emily, it turns out, was pregnant with Evelyn, our almost three year old daughter.

I share these most intimate details not because it is easy to do so but because I know I am not alone. We are not alone. And we stand together this Rosh Hashanah, one of the most difficult days on the Jewish calendar for those struggling with fertility, to say that you are not alone and to offer some guidance for the entire congregation about how to approach this vulnerable time in many couple's lives.

Rabbi Meyer:

Hayom harat ha'olam, today is the birthday of the world — today the world is born anew. These words from our liturgy highlight the central theme woven throughout our service: the creation and renewal of life. The traditional Torah portion for Rosh Hashanah tells of God intervening in our matriarch Sarah's infertility, and the haftarah portion (we will read tomorrow / we have just read) speaks of Hannah, whose prayers were answered with the birth of a child. "Bitter to the core," we read in 1 Samuel, "she prayed to the Eternal — weeping and crying. And Elkanah slept with Hannah his wife, and God remembered her. And so it was that Hannah conceived and then gave birth to a son. And she called him Samuel because she requested him from the Eternal."

She called him Samuel because she requested him from the Eternal? I rage against Jewish tradition when I read these words. Hi God. It's me, Aaron. I've been requesting for some time now and Emily is crying herself to sleep again. Where are you?

Chosen for Rosh Hashanah to give us assurance that prayer can be answered, the story of Hannah can also bring feelings of crushing rejection for those struggling with fertility or the loss of a pregnancy. The story's inverse, that God has forgotten or abandoned those unable to

welcome a child into this world, is simply untenable to my theology. My God weeps with us when the processes of nature unfold in seemingly cruel ways.

Consolation and hope, for Emily and I, came from other sources in Jewish tradition. Though the motif of barren women pervades many biblical stories, comforting psalms and prayers reminded us that God's presence is a constant even if only occasionally felt. The rituals of Shabbat served as a reminder that we already were a family. And the experience of community, of commiserating with close Jewish friends during this emotional process, lifted our spirits.

Rabbi Schulman:

For me, Hannah's story had a different effect, as I found it particularly comforting in its broad and sweeping terms. It was Hannah's fervent prayer that motivated me to continue along my path of loving myself and my partner, despite my perceived inadequacies. One of those years, on their family's annual journey to offer sacrifices at the Temple of Shiloh, Hannah approached the altar on her own, closed her eyes, and prayed her most fervent prayer, from the deepest place within herself. The priest, seeing her lips move but hearing no words, assumed that she was intoxicated and came forward to admonish her, to which she responds, "No, my Lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I poured out my soul before Adonai." It was that invitation to pour out my soul that inspired and reminded me of the centering, grounding and affirming power that prayer and connection to something-greater-than-I, something holy, had always brought me.

About two years into our "fertility journey," frustrated by the shortcomings of modern medicine and ancient alternatives both, I turned to the story of Hannah for comfort. Curious to learn more about the Jewish folk traditions that have grown around the story of Hannah, a quick internet search led me to the page of a Jewish artist who had created a simple and beautiful golden ring with Hannah's prayer inscribed on the inside, and the Hebrew word, "Klei," which means "Vessel" on the outside. Without a second thought, I found myself ordering the ring from Israel. While I tried not to imbue it with supernatural powers, wearing it was a reminder to me that I was not alone in this experience of childlessness, that centuries of women before me had found comfort in Hannah's prayer, and that regardless of my ability to bear children I was "Klei Kodesh," a sacred vessel. We knew that we were determined to become parents one way or another. Hannah's story was just one in many that I reached for as a life-raft amidst a sea of insecurity and sorrow. I did not see Hannah's experience as a guarantee that I would become pregnant, but a reassurance of my own ability to connect to my sources of strength and move through the darkness and struggle.

Rabbi Meyer:

And make no mistake, questions of fertility are the epitome of darkness and struggle. Personal struggle, as it can feel like masculinity and femininity themselves are negated by the inability to bring new life into this world. Family struggle, as well-intentioned questions about when you might expect a grandchild become daggers to the heart. Cultural darkness and alienation, given the predilection for parenthood among Jews who have a compulsive desire to count our numbers and view even today every Jewish baby as dealing Hitler further posthumous defeat. Religious darkness, as our relationship with God becomes strained and we fail at "*pur u'revu*," the first basic commandment mentioned in Torah, to "to be fruitful and multiply." Darkness and struggle, but there are sources of strength:

Rabbi Schulman:

As soon as I started sharing our fertility journey openly I was met with an outpouring of love and support. It first began with those in my immediate circle; I learned long ago that if we don't afford ourselves the opportunity to live in our experience, we isolate ourselves further and miss out on the chance to be understood and cared for. It turns out that Matt and I were far from alone. Currently in the United States, 1 in 8 couples experience infertility, and in the Jewish community the rates are even higher at 1 in 6¹. Infertility is defined as the inability to achieve a healthy pregnancy after the course of trying for one year, or six months for women over the age of 35².

Sharing my story with those in my community, many of whom happened to be parents themselves, wound up creating more intimacy and trust between us. If our stories resonate with you, you too might consider becoming more open about your experience. With us, perhaps, so you have an initial base of support, and then with others when you feel ready to expand the circle. Inevitably some well-intended-but-hurtful words will result — vulnerability is a gamble, after all — but it is worth it.

Rabbi Meyer:

Let's talk about that vulnerability for a moment, shall we? Russian Roulette involves placing a single bullet in a revolver, spinning the cylinder, and pulling the trigger. It sounds incredibly, insanely, dangerous to all of us...yet the odds, 1 in 6, are the same as the chances you take when you ask a young couple about their timeline for childrearing. We have all done it, myself included, and now is the time to stop. Whether the question is simply conversational or genuinely inquisitive, it has a disastrous impact on more couples than we realize, surfacing feelings of inadequacy and shame that we certainly never intended.

This also seems like a good place to talk about giving advice. Don't do it. Just don't. I promise, the person with whom you are speaking imagines every possible scenario, every alternative pathway, in their head on an endlessly repeating loop that fills every free moment of every day. They've already thought about every off-the-cuff response you might have. And if you are a professional in the field or believe you have a unique insight that hasn't been considered? Ask. Open the door to conversation when they are ready. There are no sweeter words to hear than "I want to offer support, tell me how."

Rabbi Schulman:

And, perhaps: "I'm here if you ever want to talk." These were the most healing words that came my way when I decided to share our story. Even among people who could commiserate, the most supportive were those who offered to share their stories if ever I wanted to hear them, simply acknowledging that pregnancy was not easy for them to achieve and that I was not alone. We are not alone. You are not alone.

A watershed moment on my journey occurred just over a year ago. Students in the high school where I taught had left a message on a whiteboard in the common area the day after Mother's Day. It read: "Happy Mother's Day to all of the teachers who we have accidentally called 'Mom'." I remember walking into work that day with the emotional hangover from yet another painful Mother's Day, head down, steeling myself to race the day, and then looking up to see

¹ <https://www.hasidah.org/tag/infertility-statistics/>

² <https://resolve.org/infertility-101/what-is-infertility/>

that note. Tears sprang to my eyes, heart-warmed by the simple and sweet message from these teenagers, reminding me that there are many ways, in addition to parenthood, to nurture life and growth. I posted a photo of the white board accompanied by a message explaining why I found it so touching, and that as a hopeful-mom-to-be, my childlessness was not an intentional choice, but one that I struggled with, particularly on Mother's Day.

After 42 months of trying to get pregnant, you might have noticed that Matt55 and I anticipate welcoming our first child in a matter of days. Ours is a success story, but not in the way you might think. Matt and I were committed to becoming parents. Emily and Aaron were committed to becoming parents. For each of us it happened differently. It could have happened through adoption, or becoming foster parents. It could have happened through surrogacy or egg-and-sperm donation. Achieving pregnancy is not the only pathway to parenthood for those who wish to expand their family.

Rabbi Meyer:

Hayom harat ha'olam, today is the birthday of the world — today the world is born anew. These words from our liturgy, combined with our Torah and Haftarah readings, highlight a central theme woven throughout our service: the creation and renewal of life. It is little wonder that Rosh Hashanah can elicit strong emotion from those struggling with fertility or the loss of a pregnancy.

Rabbi Schulman:

To be infertile is to feel less-than-whole, to feel as though there is something wrong with one's very being. The Biblical Hannah's prayer became a talisman for me – wearing it engraved on a ring around my finger a reminder not only of my plight, but of the future that I was hoping and, indeed, praying for.

Rabbi Meyer:

And there are also other sources of strength. Recognize that you are not alone. Share your journey with those you can trust for support. Take solace in the knowledge that you and your partner are already a family and that many viable pathways to parenthood exist for those who wish.

Rabbi Schulman:

You are "*klei kodesh*," sacred vessels: good daughters, good sons, good Jews no matter what, or if, your journey to parenthood. And as the community around you, we each promise to watch our language and to give advice only when asked. May this new year bring you feelings of wholeness and holiness whatever your journey may be.

Rabbi Meyer:

Shanah Tovah.