



# The Childless Couple

By Rebecca Wolf

After their fourth unsuccessful attempt at in-vitro fertilization (IVF), Chana\* and Shmuel despaired of ever having a baby of their own. Married for five years, the couple, each thirty years old, had endured countless fertility tests and treatments. Nothing seemed to be working. As one of only a handful of childless couples in their suburban New York shul, Chana and Shmuel longed not only for a baby, but also to fit into their community.

Infertility—defined as the inability to get pregnant without medical intervention within one year of trying—can be devastating for couples who endure physical, emotional and financial stresses related to the procedures.

Sadly, Chana and Shmuel are not alone. Roughly one in every six couples suffers from infertility, according to Brany Rosen, the director of A T.I.M.E. (A Torah Infertility Medium of Exchange), a New York-based organization that provides support to Orthodox couples suffering from infertility. While the incidence of infertility in the Orthodox community is not higher than that of the general population, being an Orthodox Jew can exacerbate the already difficult experience. Due to the centrality of family within traditional Judaism, many childless couples suffer from a pervasive feeling of being left out.

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*Rebecca Wolf is a writer who lives in Teaneck, New Jersey, with her husband and two children, both of whom were conceived with the help of fertility treatments.*

“I wanted to embrace so many things about Judaism,” says Michelle, a thirty-three-year-old physical therapist from Illinois who struggled for three years to have her first child. (She now has two children who were conceived through IVF.) “But when something so fundamental to the religion—having a family—was beyond my reach, how could I?”

Michelle says some of her most painful moments were during the Pesach Seder. “How could I fulfill the *mitzvot* of the

Seder without children?” she wonders. But Michelle, like many Orthodox people suffering from infertility, says Shabbat was the hardest day of the week.

Sarah, a thirty-two-year-old program director from New Jersey who suffered from repeat miscarriages, describes the challenge of going to shul on Shabbat. “Literally every time I turned around [in shul], another five women were pregnant,” she says. “It brought all of my emotions to the surface, and those losses came back over and over again.”

Sarah could have chosen not to go to shul, but Eytan, a thirty-nine-year-old Judaic studies teacher from the Midwest, insisted on *davening* with a minyan. Eytan and his wife, Tali, struggled to have a second child for five years. (After numerous IVF procedures, they succeeded in having another child.) For Eytan, Shabbat was always hard, “because of all the children running around.” But the most difficult time for him was morning minyan.

“Usually during the week, shul was my sanctum—a quiet place to get away from everything and just concentrate on God,” Eytan says. “But it seemed that every Monday and Thursday, some guy whose wife was expecting would get *petichah* [the honor of opening the ark, traditionally granted to a man whose wife is due to give birth soon], and it would just kill me.”

Often when one wants to have a baby, it seems as if pregnant women and couples with baby carriages are everywhere. But within the Orthodox world, where people become parents at a relatively young age and often have numerous children, pregnant women and couples with baby carriages really are all around.

“I used to have to leave shul early on Shabbos morning to avoid sitting with all of the three- and four-year-olds who would come in at the end. It was just too painful,” says David, a thirty-eight-year-old attorney from New Jersey who tried to have a child for seven years. (He and his wife, Naomi, eventually had three children with the help of fertility treatments.)

Often, for infertile couples, the social discomfort is acute. Chana and Shmuel admit they felt isolated within their community. “As your friends begin to have children, their social circles change to include parents of their kids’ friends, and you feel left out,” Chana says. “We would even occasionally offer to baby-sit for our friends’ children so that we would have someone else’s kids who knew and liked us.” (They eventually had two children without fertility treatments; doctors cannot explain their years of infertility.)

Even when friends with children try to reach out, however, their efforts may backfire. Rachel, a thirty-four-year-old communications executive from New

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York who struggled with infertility for four years before having her first child (she now has three), recalls being asked by a close friend to be the *kevatter* (one who carries the baby to the *bimah*) at her son’s Bris.

“That’s usually an honor reserved for family [members],” says Rachel. “When it’s given to close friends, it’s obvious that the couple is trying [to conceive]. All eyes were on us for a specific reason.”

Rachel, like most others interviewed for this article, says she and her husband never publicly acknowledged their infertility problem. In fact, many couples say they did not even tell their families.

“We’re very private people,” says Eytan, about himself and his wife. “Perhaps it was obvious to some people that we were having trouble [conceiving] ... but we never actually made it public news.”

“At the end of the day, much of infertility is about intimacy,” says Gila, a thirty-one-year-old teacher from Los Angeles who tried for two years to have her first child. (She now has three children, all of whom were conceived with the help of fertility drugs.) “And because it’s a private topic, we don’t want to discuss it.”

Herein lies a major obstacle for those who want to help couples struggling with infertility. It’s hard to be supportive of a problem when the problem is never acknowledged. If these couples don’t ask for help, what should their families, friends and rabbis do to help them?

Ilana, a twenty-eight-year-old occupational therapist from Florida who struggled with infertility for three years (she now has two children, both conceived through IVF), has one answer: “Just give me space,” she says. “If I don’t want to go to a *simchah*, then don’t press me. Going to a Bris or [a] *Simchat Bat*, in particular, is too painful.”

Rosen, who helped found A T.I.M.E. eleven years ago, says people should be careful about what they say to childless couples. “People need to learn general sensitivity,” she says. “It doesn’t matter whether one knows for sure that a couple is struggling with infertility ... people should just be careful and watch their language.”

David recalls attending a Shabbat meal in his community where he and his wife were the only couple out of four that did not have children. “The entire conversation revolved around children—nursery schools, pediatricians, toys, et cetera,” he says. “It’s not that I want the world to stop, but it was an incredible instance of insensitivity, and I don’t even think people were aware of it.”

Rabbis can also become more involved in assisting infertile couples. Unfortunately, very few of those interviewed said they rely on their rabbis for anything other than halachic questions with respect to their infertility.

“I would never go to my rabbi for emotional support,” says Gila. “It’s too uncomfortable.”

“People are not using rabbis as an emotional resource ... [because] the rabbis are too busy,” says Rosen. “Emotional help takes up a tremendous amount of time. If rabbis could be counselors and halachic authorities, they would be.”

Rosen also believes that couples don't seek counseling from their rabbis because rabbis don't understand enough about fertility treatments. “There is a tremendous void of *halachah* meets technology,” she says. “A lot of *rabbanim* prohibit certain procedures simply because they do not know the technology.”

By holding periodic conferences and seminars, A T.I.M.E. aims at educating doctors in halachic matters and rabbis in the latest fertility treatments.

While only God can truly help infertile couples realize their dream of having a child, we must do whatever we can to make the infertility experience less heart wrenching. The following is a list of things that rabbis, *rebbetzins* and the general public can do to help:

- Introduce couples to Orthodox support organizations for those suffering from infertility [see sidebar for a list].

- Consider directing money from a shul's discretionary fund towards a childless couple to help defray the cost of infertility treatments. In many states, such treatments are not covered by insurance. (Drugs alone can cost \$3,000, and one cycle of IVF runs about \$12,000).

- Provide reproductive education in *kallah/chatan* classes. This is especially important for those Orthodox couples who marry late in life. (Recently, A T.I.M.E. hosted a mini-conference in New York, entitled “Time is of Essence,” to educate older couples on reproductive assistance.)

- Distribute educational materials on infertility through the local mikvah. The phone number of a *yotzet halachah* (female halachic advisor on women's issues) or a local woman who would be willing to talk about infertility could also be made available at the mikvah.

- Connect couples who have experienced infertility and are now parents with those who are still struggling with it. While it may be difficult—even insensitive—to approach a childless couple directly, couples could make themselves available through local rabbis. 

# Opting to Adopt

By Rebecca Wolf

Infertility can be particularly devastating at an older age, according to Leah, a forty-year-old accountant from New York.

“Everyone keeps telling me to get on with it and have kids,” she says. “Don't they realize that I've been trying since I got married two years ago, and nothing is working?”

However, Leah is not yet considering adoption.

“If God doesn't want me to have my own child, then maybe I'm not meant to be a parent,” she says.

The rapid advancements in fertility treatments can also make some resistant to adopt, as new procedures may offer couples the chance of having a biological child.

Moreover, couples may not want to adopt because of the fear of how a non-Jewish child will fit into the community.

“[My husband and I] were worried about how a non-Caucasian child would be accepted,” says Naomi, a thirty-six-year-old dietitian from New Jersey. After struggling with infertility for seven years, Naomi and her husband decided to prepare for the possibility of adoption by filling out state-certification forms. “We knew it was easier to get a child from Asia or South America, but it scared us.” (They eventually had three biological children with the help of fertility treatments.)

There is only one Jewish baby for every 500 non-Jewish babies up for adoption, according to Yettie Katz, who, along with her husband, Alter, directs the Menorah Project, an arm of A T.I.M.E. that connects Jewish birth mothers with Orthodox adoptive parents.

A year ago, shortly after the Katzes adopted a newborn boy, they realized the need for a resource for Orthodox Jewish adoption, and created the Menorah Project. The Katzes try to find Jewish birth mothers through Hillel Houses on college campuses; so far, they have connected a handful of Jewish birth mothers with Orthodox adoptive parents. Presently, the Katzes are working towards incorporating the organization as an official adoption agency. (Adoption can cost as much as \$15,000, including lawyers' fees as well as travel expenses and medical care for the birth mother and baby.)

There are currently twenty-five couples waiting to adopt a Jewish child through the Menorah Project. Katz says roughly half of the couples are in their twenties and early thirties; the other half are in their late-thirties and forties. She acknowledges that Orthodox couples are less likely to adopt a non-Jewish child, mostly for social reasons.

But she admonishes couples looking to adopt not to turn away a non-Jewish baby, as chances of finding a Jewish baby are not high.

“No one has to know that the baby wasn't born Jewish,” Katz says. “That's your private life.”

Katz recommends that couples considering adoption get certified through their home state. The certification process involves background checks on personal, economic and family history; letters of recommendation from friends and a home visit from a social worker. “The process can take up to six months,”

## Resources for Infertile Orthodox Couples:

### A T.I.M.E.

(A Torah Infertility  
Medium of Exchange)

Offers physician referrals, adoption services, resources for financial aid, Shabbatonim, conferences and educational events, a pregnancy loss support program and other services. Based in New York, with branches in California, Canada and Israel.

Tel: 718-686-8912

Help-line: 437-7110

[www.atime.org](http://www.atime.org)

### Tefilat Chana

A web site that serves the needs of Jewish women who are experiencing the challenges of infertility and/or pregnancy loss.

[www.chanasprayer.org](http://www.chanasprayer.org)

### Small Wonders

Toronto-based organization dedicated to helping Jewish infertile couples with medical, financial and rabbinical support.

Tel: 416-742-0090

[www.webxoom.com/smallwonders](http://www.webxoom.com/smallwonders)

### Doros

Offers interest-free loans and insurance information to couples experiencing infertility.

Tel: 718-854-4341

### Little Miracles

Based in New York, this community organization offers emotional support and funding to infertile couples in the Rockaways and Long Island.

Tel: 516-371-4344 • 718-327-0312

### Puah Institute

The Institute, based in Jerusalem, provides free counseling and assistance to couples with fertility problems.

Tel: 972-2-651-5050

[www.puah.org.il](http://www.puah.org.il)

### Zir Chemed

Located in Jerusalem, Zir Chemed is a non-profit organization dedicated to assisting infertile Jewish couples throughout the world by providing counseling, clinical treatment and financial assistance. Zir Chemed serves as an information clearinghouse for rabbanim and medical professionals throughout the world.

Tel: 972-2-653-6859

[www.zirchemed.org](http://www.zirchemed.org)