Conceiving the Impossible

By Sara Yoheved Rigler

For non-believers, infertility is a painful battle against uncooperative nature. The weapons are hormone shots, ultrasound, ovulation boosters and in vitro fertilization (IVF). For a religious Jewish woman who knows that the “key to children” is in Hashem’s hands, the weapons are in addition to all of the above, prayer, study, blessings from tzedakah-trustees to keep in mind and consistent working on oneself in order to become a vessel worthy of receiving the great blessing of children. To my husband and me, infertility often seemed like a painful battle against … Hashem Himself.

...and we were married for eight years before we had a baby. The couple themselves, however, maintain their infertility in terms of months, with each month exceeding them to new hope, then crushing them down to devastating disappointment. Ninety-six months of alternating between anticipation and failure is infinitely longer than eight years.

For a religious Jewish woman, the struggle to conceive is complicated by the laws of family purity. If her ovulation precedes her visit to the mikvah by more than twenty-four hours, that month—a whole month—is wasted. For me, getting to the mikvah on time became a time consuming activity, involving rabbits, doctors and me—an increasingly frustrated and frantic new wife.

...I believed, as an article of faith, that Hashak Baruch Hu gives each person as much good as she can hold. If I was bestowed a particular blessing on me, I considered, it was because my vessel was big enough or intact enough to hold it. It was the first time in my life that I applied the words “not good enough” to myself.

I should give more tzedakah, I told myself. But our finances were already strained to the limit because of our expensive fertility treatments; we could barely afford to give the required 10 percent of our income (which was more Shabbat guests, I told myself). But the treatments filled my time and sapped my energy; I had little left to devote to guests. “You should be nicer and kinder,” I told myself. But my hormone shots left me bouncing off the walls, more irascible than ever.

Exactly three o’clock, with tremblings in my hands, I pressed the phone button. The lab technician told me to phone after three o’clock. That month my period did not come on the date expected … nor on the next day. On the third day, full of hope, I went to the kupat cholim. Two weeks later, the dot on the home pregnancy test turned blue. I was pregnant!

From the conception of my first child I learned that the laws of nature do not limit a Jew because God runs the world. I heard that it was a sigulah to pray for a child at the ruins of her house, located in the village of Shunam, in the Jezreel Valley. We went. At the entrance to Shunam, we realized that it was now an Arab village. This was during the days of the first intifada. We hesitated. Should we endanger ourselves and our small daughter for the sake of a sigulah that might not work?

If’s our measure of a disaster that we ventured into the village. It’s a measure of the desperation of many other Jewish couples that the first teenage boy we asked knew exactly what we were looking for. He led us to the site. We stood there, beside a muddy heap of stones, and prayed.

The Torah relates the story of the Shunamite woman, who was childless until the prophet Elisha blessed her. We...
more stab at fixing ourselves would procure for ourselves the coveted prize.

The last stop on the fertility train is IVF. For me, ironically, it required both the most hishtadlut and the most emunah. This is because IVF entails daily injections of frightfully expensive fertility drugs, daily blood tests and ultrasounds and a surgical procedure.

Emunah, because my doctor told me that at my age—I was forty-five by then—I had 2 1/2 percent chance of birthing a live baby.

The first time we tried, we failed. The IVF clinic at Bikur Cholim Hospital offers two tries for the same price. Our rebbe, the Amshinover Rebbe, had been directing us to continue, year after year, with fertility treatments, but now I had run out of stamina. Whatever the rebbe may say, I told my husband, this second IVF treatment would be my final attempt.

With IVF, the more eggs produced, the greater the chance of success. My daily ultrasound tests revealed that I had three follicles almost ready to become eggs. This was the minimum amount; with less than three eggs, the procedure would not even be attempted.

The next day, when I went for my ultrasound, the radiologist looked at the computer screen and said, "I'm sorry, but you have only two eggs. The other one turned into a cyst." I was decimated. Two eggs? Dr. Kafka wouldn't do the IVF on only two eggs. That meant that the expense of the fertility drugs, the suffering from the daily shots and the time spent on daily tests were all for nothing!

Holding back my tears, I said, "Please, I beg you, this is my last chance to do IVF. Please fudge the results, and write down that I have three eggs. If Hashem wants me to get pregnant, He can do it with only two eggs." The radiologist smiled compassionately, and noted that there were three eggs.

The next day, in the operating room, when Dr. Kafka began the extraction, she found only one egg. She shook her head. "Well," she muttered, "you're already here, so I might as well extract the egg and use it. But nobody gets pregnant with only one egg."

The egg fertilized. Two days later when Dr. Kafka, a staunch secularist, was about to insert the zygote into my uterus, she looked at me and uttered a single word: "Pray!" I did.

One day, a week later, I felt a cold sensation in my womb. I had felt this same sensation the previous time I had done IVF. When that round failed, I traced it to that cold sensation. Feeling it again, I felt that we had failed not once more, but forever. This was our final chance.

I burst into tears. The battle was over, and I had lost. For the first time in my life, I had utterly failed. Nothing—not my brains, my hard work nor my determination—could succeed in wresting a baby from Hashem.

Not until later would I realize that that moment of defeat held within it an inner triumph. I had been trying, with a frenzy of activity, to foist my will on Hashem. What Hashem really wanted from me was to nullify myself to His will. Only in that moment of total defeat did I finally become the empty vessel that Hashem could fill.

A week later I apathetically showed up at the IVF clinic for the final procedure of the process: the blood test to ascertain pregnancy. I didn't even bother to call for the results that afternoon.

At 3:20 the phone rang. The nurse called to tell me I was pregnant.

At the age of forty-six, I gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Actually, my five years of struggle with infertility culminated in two births: the birth of my son and the birth of a wiser, humbler and more surrendered me.