

# Conceiving the Impossible

BY SARA RIGLER

For non-believers, infertility is a painful battle against uncooperative nature. The weapons are hormone shots, ultrasounds, 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, *segulot*, blessings from *tzaddikim*, visits to *kevarim* and incessant 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.

No sooner was our wedding over than the strains of “Simon Tov Umazal Tov” were drowned out by the loud ticking of my biological clock. Before we unwrapped all of our presents, I turned thirty-nine. Before all of the thank-you notes were in the mail, my husband turned forty.

Outsiders measure a couple’s infertility in terms of years: “The Cohens were married for eight years before they had a

baby.” The couple themselves, however, measure their infertility in terms of months, with each month elevating them to new hope, then crashing 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 tense drama involving rabbis, doctors and me—an increasingly frustrated and frantic new wife.

Was I ever, during my years of infertility, tempted to cheat? To go to the mikvah the night I knew I was ovulating, even on the fourth or fifth night of my counting? No, I knew that I couldn’t have a baby by trying to trick God. It would have been like robbing a jewelry store and returning the next day to the same store to fence the goods. The Gemara says that there are three partners in the creation of a child: the father, the mother and Hakadosh Baruch Hu. *Halachah* comes from Hashem. Babies come from Hashem. I knew with certainty that I couldn’t obtain the latter by spurning the former.

Four months after our marriage in Los Angeles, my husband and I made *aliyah*.

In Israel, I heard that by taking a certain medication, I could delay my ovulation. I immediately went to get the necessary prescription. Dr. Miller said that the first step was to track my cycle. He prescribed blood tests to check my hormone levels. I returned to him, my results in hand, on a Thursday morning.

Examining the papers, he announced, “You’re ovulating this morning. When are you going to the mikvah?” he asked.

“Tomorrow night,” I answered.

Dr. Miller shook his head. “That’s too bad,” he said. “The egg only lives between twelve and twenty-four hours. You’ll miss this month, but next month we’ll start with a comprehensive program.”

On Friday night, I went to the mikvah. Two weeks later, the dot on the home pregnancy test turned blue. I was pregnant!

Exactly on my due date, our daughter was born in an all-natural birth, without any complications. We named her Pliyah, “wonder of God.”

From the conception of my first child I learned that the laws of nature do not limit a Jew, because God runs the world. This was both good news and bad news. The good news was that no “natural cause”—not my cycle, not my age, not the statistical probabilities that doctors love to quote—could prevent me from getting pregnant again. The bad news was that God’s will could not be

manipulated by the aggressive assault of my over-achieving self.

My father had raised me with the conviction that I could accomplish anything I set my mind to—with enough resolve, hard work and perseverance. This formula had served me well. I had graduated with honors from a prestigious university, had run a large organization and had written a book that some critics, and many readers, acclaimed. I was cocky with my own competence. I considered myself an accomplished, talented and effective woman who had succeeded—by dint of my wits and tenacity—in opening every door I chose to enter. Fertility was to become the only door that did not immediately respond to my knocking, banging or impassioned pleas.

Six months later, I became pregnant again, this time with an ectopic pregnancy. The ordeal left me with only one fallopian tube and much scar tissue. This was the beginning of my secondary fertility nightmare.

Our rabbis assured us that conceiving a second child required a combination of *emunah* (belief) and *hishtadlut* (effort). The thorny question was, How much of each?

The paradoxical answer was, 100 percent *emunah* and 100 percent *hishtadlut*. We pursued every possible medical and spiritual means of conceiving a baby. I took drugs to delay my ovulation and hormone shots to strengthen it. I took my basal body temperature every morning and had ultrasounds month after month to track my ovulation. I wore a ruby, borrowed from a ruby *gemach* (the Gemara recommends wearing a ruby). I drank tea made from pomegranate skins (ugh!) and chewed on *mastik Temani* (Yemenite gum). I underwent a hysteroscopy, and then laser surgery to remove the polyp discovered. My husband and I prayed fervently at the *kevarim* of the Arizal, Rav Meir Ba’al Hanes, Sara and Rachel Imeinu, Yocheved, the prophet Chabakkuk (who himself was a miracle baby), “the washerwoman” and others. We tried artificial insemination six times. Thrice, I submitted to treatments by Reena, a Yemenite

woman who put burning crucibles on my abdomen, which left me with giant welts. I underwent an excruciating test called a uterine X-ray, which revealed that my one fallopian tube was blocked, which explained why all of our efforts had been in vain. Then I underwent a laparoscopy to open the blocked tube. Yet, with all of these efforts, we knew that conceiving a baby was entirely in the hands of Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

The Torah relates the story of the Shunamite woman, who was childless until the prophet Elisha blessed her. We

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heard that it was a *segulah* 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 *segulah* that might not work?

It’s a measure of our desperation 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.

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* for a blood test. The lab technician told me to phone after three o’clock.

At exactly three o’clock, with trembling hands, I dialed the lab’s number. Busy. A dozen phone calls later, when I finally got through, I told the technician my test number. A few long seconds

later, she fired a single word at me: “*Shili*” (negative). Caught off guard, I asked, “*Shili?* Are you sure?”

“Yes,” was her abrupt reply, as she hung up the phone. I sat there clutching the receiver and wondering, amidst my tears, “What more does Hashem want from me? ‘He is good, and He does good.’ How little it would cost Him to just grant me this one tiny baby!”

A religious woman struggling to conceive cannot doubt the compassion of The Compassionate One, so she ends up doubting herself. “If I were worthy, I’d be pregnant,” becomes the nagging refrain that replays in her mind with every failed try, with every abrupt “*shili*.”

And because we live in communities that abound in children, the corollary that follows that refrain is: “Am I so much worse than all of those happy mothers pushing their baby carriages with two toddlers in tow?”

I believed, as an article of faith, that Hakadosh Baruch Hu gives each person as much good as she can hold. If He isn’t bestowing a particular blessing on me, I concluded, it’s because my vessel isn’t 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.

“We 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 *ma’aser*. “We should host 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.

Our life became a blind auction, where the bidders submit written bids without a clue as to whether their bid is high enough to win. After the auctioneer calls out the winning figure, the losers castigate themselves for not submitting higher bids. How could we ever know how much effort was enough? Maybe one more procedure, one more *kever*; one

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*. *Hishtadlut* 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—my chance of birthing a live baby was 2½ percent.

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. Only 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. I surren-

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dered. I waved the tattered white flag of my vanquished dreams and admitted defeat.

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 *bittul* 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. JA