

# Unanswered Prayers

Even with God as a partner, making babies is not as easy as many people think.

BY RABBI JEFFREY MILLER

“When are you going to have another child?” is one of the more common questions I am frequently asked. Many of my congregants come right out and voice their displeasure over my failure to have what they consider to be an appropriate number of offspring. Others, having observed that it’s “time for another baby,” simply offer me their great insight.

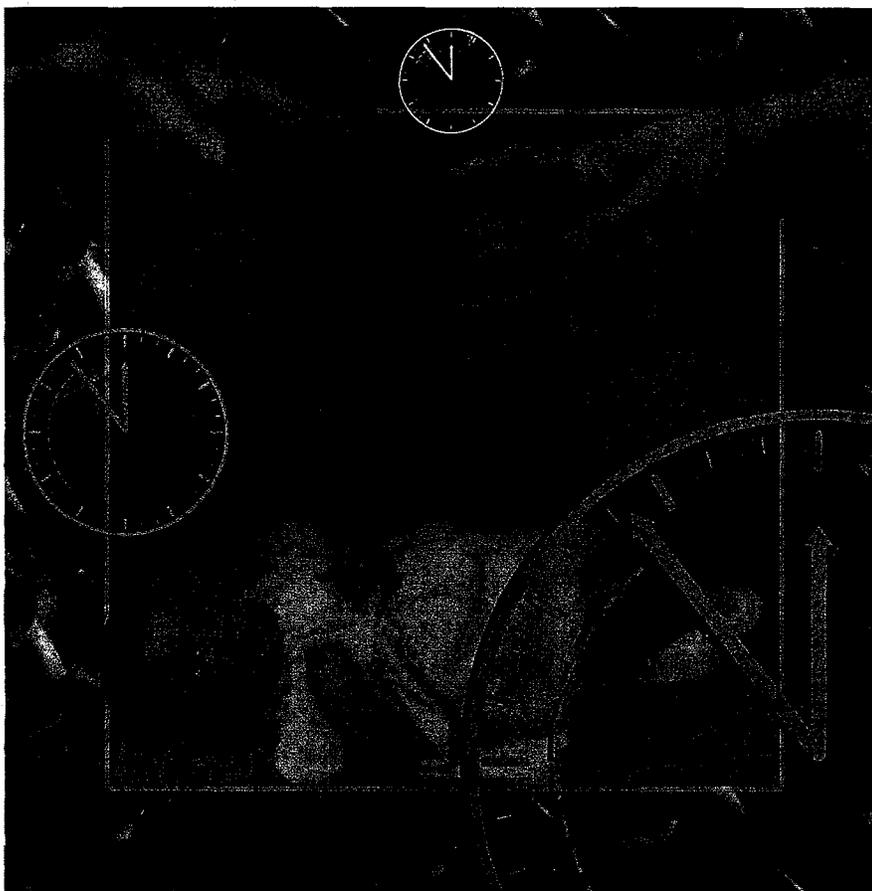
Though they don’t realize it, their queries are an unwelcome invasion of my privacy. It’s annoying when our families bug us; it’s intrusive when outsiders join in the chorus. How do they know whether our single-child status is a matter of personal choice or cosmic fate? And in either event, do they believe I should be discussing such personal matters with them?

I usually respond with something like: “It’s not up to me, it’s up to God.” Then I watch their faces. Even though it might take awhile for the questioner to get the full impact of my answer, eventually I’ll see the light bulb of understanding flick on. “Oh, I didn’t know,” or worse, “Don’t worry,” are typical responses.

Don’t worry? Of course I worry! I haven’t gained 85 pounds this last decade of my life being happy and carefree!

I probably sound a bit callous. After all, my congregants only mean well, right? Well, meaning well isn’t always enough. People really do say the stupidest things. Though they try to be eloquent and consoling, most fall short, coming across as insensitive and thoughtless. Much as I try to look at the good intentions behind their gaffes, I know these same well-meaning people would be outraged if I said to them the very things they routinely say to me.

I talk to people for a living. I listen to their problems and hear about their kids. I visit them in the hospital and offer spiritual comfort and concrete direction when they call upon me. We meet at their homes when they’re recuperating from surgery or sitting shiva. I don’t have an advanced degree in counseling or psychology,



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but common sense — and religious doctrine — tell me there are times I should offer advice and insights; times I must give hope and positive reinforcement; and times when the most I can do is hold someone’s hand while they grieve.

My wife, Enid, isn’t subtle when she responds to The Question. When a congregant recently asked her if she was pregnant yet, my wife curtly replied, “No, I can’t have any more children,” and walked away, leaving the woman to contemplate the depth of her indiscretion. When another well-intentioned worshiper told her she was “glowing” and “surely we could expect an announcement soon,” my wife coldly retorted, “Here’s the announcement: No, I’m not pregnant.

The glow is just the side effect of all the medications I take to *try* to get pregnant!” (Enid didn’t bother telling her about the other side effects of these medications, like mood swings. Some things can be understood without being said.)

The Question has been asked in many different ways, the most upsetting of which goes like this: “When is Avi [my 4 1/2-year-old son] going to have a little baby brother or sister?” It’s essentially the same question, but I don’t like interrogators using my son as an instrument to convey their point: We know you did it once, so now do it again.

People assume that since we were able to bring one life into the world, we can bring others as well. Don’t



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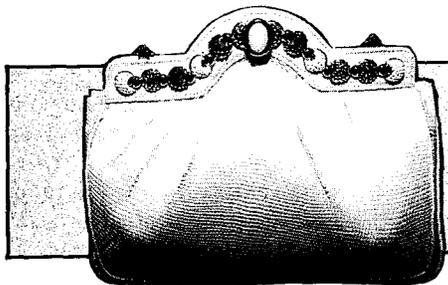
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## MY TURN

they realize that each birth is a miracle? Don't they understand that just because God chose to bless us once, there's no guarantee He will bless us again? Do they understand anything about reproductive biology? Or faith?

I'm reminded of our matriarch, Rachel, who tried for so long to have a baby. After many years of emptiness, the Almighty God blessed her with a son. She named him Joseph, which comes from the Hebrew word Yoseph, meaning "increase." While Rachel still awaited the birth of her son, she began praying for her next child. I never before understood the depth of her pain, but now I know that the story was written especially for me and my wife to read.

Today, I read many biblical stories from a different perspective. God tested Abraham, Isaac and Sarah when He commanded that Isaac be bound upon the altar. I now see in this ancient story a meaning beyond the classical, rabbinic interpretations. I feel empathy for this family that endured great pain in making a family — and in holding it together — as their dreams of happiness were tested.

Although a lot of people have said it, the absolute worst thing anyone can say to my wife after another miscarriage is: "At least you have your son." Is that supposed to be a comfort? It wasn't to Rachel. Should I tell the same thing to a mother whose teenager has just died in a car accident: "At least you have another child?"

The pain we feel after a miscarriage is beyond expression, because the loss cannot be tempered by having shared any joy. The life we have lost represents potential — potential that will never be realized. There was no laughter, no soft touch. Nothing to compensate for the grief.

It's frustrating. My wife and I know all too well that in some ways having a healthy and happy son highlights our inability to have another baby. Still, I couldn't imagine the scope of our pain if we didn't have our son to hold and hug, to love and teach.

Avi wants to know why all his friends have brothers and sisters, while he doesn't. He told me that he wants someone to play with when he gets home from school, and that he'll even help us take care of David. (He's picked out a name for our non-existent baby.) Neither my wife nor I get angry

# Kashruth Alert:

## Not All Vodkas are Created Equal

### The kosher consumer,

quite conscientious about kosher supervision, has been drinking vodka without Rabbinical supervision - unaware of its non-kosher potential. A "Kosher" product must meet all the requirements of strict Jewish law; *all the ingredients must be kosher*, including flavors, stabilizers, enzymes, etc- and it must be produced on kosher or "kashered" equipment. Although vodka is made of natural ingredients such as grains or potatoes, consumers have no way of knowing if additives are used to process the vodka's consistency, color or flavor. Some brands of vodka can be considered non-kosher.

Many domestic vodka distilleries produce a variety of non-kosher spirits, in addition to vodka, using the same equipment. Until recently, sophisticated "kosher" consumers - so careful about everything they eat or drink - continued to buy vodka that did not meet recognized and responsible kosher certification.

This issue has recently been addressed by The Finnish National Distillers, a wholly owned subsidiary of ALKO, Ltd., producers of Finlandia Vodka. Determined to meet the sincere and real



(L-R) Chester Brandes, president of the Finnish National Distillers and Rabbi Moshe Bernstein, administrative coordinator of the Orthodox Union.



Liquor store in Israel prominently displaying Finlandia Vodka, the brand that was chosen number one by 'mavens' in a vodka taste test.

needs of consumers who were interested in the integrity of the kashruth of all they purchased, ALKO garnered the international resources of the Orthodox Union (OU) - the country's most respected kosher supervising organization - to assure all that Finlandia Vodka has met the strictest standards by acquiring OU certification.

Rabbi Chaim Goldsweig, a Rabbinic Coordinator on international call for the OU, logged considerable frequent flier miles in his multiple trips to Helsinki and the ultra modern plants where production of Finlandia Vodka takes place. In conversation, he makes numerous references to the sincere respect everyone at ALKO evinced in meeting his Rabbinic requests towards kashruth standards - from equipment to enzyme formulations.

Fortunately, kosher consumer's standards need not be shortchanged. Companies such as Finlandia Vodka have gone to the top of the world to obtain the highest kosher standards - all one has to do is ask...

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## MY TURN

when Avi asks this question. We understand his innocent curiosity. After all, our situation affects him personally, and he deserves a good answer. I just can't seem to come up with one.

When I told Avi it takes *three* partners to make a baby, he was surprised. He thought it only took a mommy and a daddy. I told him that it also requires God's blessing, so he decided that each night he would add a special prayer for a little sister or brother — it didn't matter which. I'm afraid he's going to learn, too soon, that our prayers don't always get answered.

When we conceived Avi we were young and innocent. We thought having sex without contraception automatically meant a baby would arrive. And it did. The first time. It wasn't until we were ready for number two that we learned making a baby wasn't so easy.

We tried in vain for about a year.

## Sex became a source of failure rather than a sharing of body and soul.

Then, one morning, we received a call from my wife's doctor. He told us he had found the reason for her three miscarriages: Enid had lupus, a condition that made conception possible but difficult. For 18 months, we saw doctors in New Jersey, Philadelphia and Manhattan. Each doctor we went to had a different opinion regarding treatment. In the interim, there were two more miscarriages and many painful tests.

Finally, a specialist at a major New York hospital told us that my wife was perfectly healthy. Lupus had been misdiagnosed.

She told us: "You're fine. Go home, have fun and make a baby." How much fun is there in charting basal temperatures? How much enjoyment is there when sex is determined by a doctor rather than a desire to be intimate? Sex became a source of failure rather than a sharing of body and soul. More times than not, we both cried afterward.

Soon after our New York specialist told us everything was going to be

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okay, my wife did conceive. But the pregnancy ended with emergency surgery to remove her right fallopian tube, which had ruptured as a result of an ectopic pregnancy.

Then it was my turn. A new set of doctors suggested that I be examined by a urologist. It seems a significant percentage of "secondary infertility" problems can be traced to the male partner. We discovered my sperm count was so low that corrective surgery was required.

Now I'm better; I have the ultrasounds and sperm analysis results to prove it. My wife, on the other hand, has just suffered her second tubal pregnancy.

So as of now, we are out of the baby-making business. Enid's doctor told her she shouldn't attempt to conceive again.

Eight miscarriages and two ectopic pregnancies have taken their toll on both of us. "Of course," the doctor added, "there's always in-vitro fertilization." But given all we've been through, we didn't even let him finish the sentence. My wife and I agreed that enough was enough.

Whenever I hold a newborn infant in my arms and bestow a blessing, I wonder if I will ever again enjoy the feeling of ecstasy I see in the eyes of the baby's parents. It's odd. As much as I've prayed to God, I haven't listened to His reply. Has God been sending me messages I've refused to accept? I wonder why I pushed so hard for another baby, endangering my wife's health and happiness? These are pointless questions; nevertheless, they occupy my thoughts.

For now, we just want to give ourselves a chance to live without the pressure of trying to make another baby. We are thinking of getting a dog so Avi can have someone to play with after school. When my wife recovers from her physical trauma — and we both recover from the emotional blows — we'll consider other options.

Avi has already told us that he would be perfectly satisfied with an adopted brother or sister. It would be fun, he says, "to adopt Superman, like those Kent people." I smile at the simplicity of his world. Perhaps, we will consider adoption. But for now, I'll just listen more closely to God. ■

*Jeffrey Miller is the religious leader of the Marathon JCC in Douglaston, N.Y.*



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