

CHAPTER ONE

*Sarah*

AGE, LAUGHTER, MALE FACTOR,  
SURROGACY, AND EGG DONATION



## CHAPTER ONE

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*Sarah: First known as Sarai, she is unable to conceive. She “gives” her handmaid, Hagar, to her husband, then known as Avram, saying “Maybe I will be built up through her.” But when Hagar’s son Ishmael is well into boyhood, Sarah (with her new covenantal name) is visited by a divine messenger who tells her that, at the same time the following year, she will bear a son. Sarah laughs to herself, since both she and Avraham (with his own new name) are both quite old. But indeed, she gives birth to Isaac one year later.*

## AGE

### *Chronologically Young, Biologically Old*

*I was only 30 when I began to worry that it was taking too long to conceive. I convinced my husband that something was wrong and that we should get tested to find out what was going on. After what seemed like an innocuous blood test, we had a meeting with a reproductive endocrinologist. She told me in no uncertain terms that despite being chronologically young—most people who come to her office are well beyond 30—my reproductive system was aging rapidly and my FSH was very high. She went on to tell me that I had a 2% chance of conceiving naturally and that I was likely to go through menopause around 40. After hearing that, I suddenly felt so old. A big part of the next chapter of my journey was to find stories of women who were older than me who had conceived. I loved meeting women who became mothers in their 40’s. They were my inspiration. (Leora)*

**What role has age and aging played in your fertility journey? How has it affected you?**

Sarah is the first of many women in the Torah who struggle to conceive; age is a crucial piece of her narrative.

### *Genesis 18:11*

וְאַבְרָהָם וְשָׂרָה זְקֵנִים בָּאִים בְּיָמֵים חַדְלֵי־לֵהִיּוֹת לְשָׂרָה אַרְךָ כְּנָשִׁים:

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, and well stricken in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.

According to Rashi, the most famous traditional Jewish commentator on the Torah, Sarah had already gone through menopause. To conceive, she would need some sort of miraculous return to her fertile years.

If age is challenging your ability to conceive, you may have been told that you have “advanced maternal age,” “high FSH,” or are “pre-menopausal.” You may have been made to feel like your “clock is ticking” and you have “only moments of being fertile remaining.” You may encounter people who refer to your age in a way that instills fear in your heart, rather than promoting a healthy and viable way forward.

While the biological reality may be that your fertility is impacted by your age, the way that age is spoken about in the fertility world can leave us feeling helpless, hopeless, and depressed. You may even begin to experience some of the negative qualities of aging, such as lethargy, from a combination of your physical aging and your concerns about aging. Your worry that you may no longer be able to bring life into the world, in the context of the mind/body connection, may further undermine your ability to conceive. However, though you cannot reverse time, and you should take seriously the medical realities as presented to you by trusted professionals, you do not need to take at face value the messages about age that you are confronted with. You can pursue rejuvenation and vitality, and internalize different and more positive messages about your age.

## SELF-CARE

### *Forever Young*

You may want to listen to this song, recite these lyrics to yourself, or have your partner or a friend say them to you when you are feeling negatively about your age. Set an intention that you will allow these words to fill you with a youthful and energetic feeling, irrespective of your chronological, biological, or psychological age.

FOREVER YOUNG (*Tza-ir LaNetzach*)

Hebrew by Rami Kleinstein, originally by Bob Dylan

May God guard you	<i>Sheyishmor otcha ha-el</i>
and make your wish come true	<i>v'yagshim mish'alt'cha</i>
may you do for another	<i>sheta'aseh bishvil acher</i>
and he for you	<i>v'hu l'ma'ancho</i>
may you touch every star	<i>shetig-a b'chol kochav</i>
and capture each stage	<i>ut-tapes al kol shalav</i>
may you stay forever young...	<i>shetisha-er tza-ir lanetzach</i>

May your hands be busy	<i>Sheyihyu yadeicha asukot</i>
and your steps fast	<i>utz-adeicha m'hirim</i>
may your house be stable	<i>sheyihyeh beitcha yatjvu</i>
against the winds of change	<i>mul ruchot hashinuim</i>
may there be joy in your heart	<i>sheb'lib'cha tihyeh simchah</i>
and may they sing your song	<i>v'yashiru et shircha</i>
may you stay forever young.*	<i>shetisha-er tza-ir lanetzach.</i>

One way to relate to age while on the fertility journey is to seek out pathways to feel younger. It is also important to be honest about your feelings about your age in this context, and to intentionally process those feelings. Perhaps Sarah herself even did this...

## PROFESSOR VANESSA OCHS, "SARAH SPEAKS TO US"

You'll never know what it is like to want a child your whole life, and then, like Sarah, discover you are expecting at the age of ninety. But you may know what it's like to spend many years wanting something very much, so much that the desire defines you or depletes you. It could be the dream of having a child, it could be a goal that had to be put on hold, or one that remained outside your reach.

Like Sarah, you may have had the experience of belatedly getting what you've yearned for and not knowing quite how to react. Had your dream come true when you had hoped it would, you might have felt grateful that your life was swimming along its course as you had imagined it should. If the dream took just a bit longer than you expected, or if it

\* Rami Kleinstein. "Forever Young/ Tza-ir LaNetzach." *Love Me/ E'ha'vini*, (Helicon Records, 2005), Digital medium. Original lyrics by Bob Dylan (Ram's Horn Music, 1973; renewed 2001).

required more hard work than you had imagined, you might have been ecstatic when it came true. The cosmos was finally smiling down on you, rewarding you for your tenacity, determination, and patience...

Sarah models how we can respond to dreams that become belatedly fulfilled. We can laugh. And what a complicated, bittersweet laugh it is, reminding us that it's very human to feel joy and sorrow at the same time."<sup>\*</sup>

You may want to reflect on the following questions:

- When you were younger, did you envision become a parent at a certain age, and if so what age?
- Why was that the age that you thought might be ideal?
- What were you doing in your life when you actually reached that age?
- Is there anything that you see as less than ideal about becoming a parent at your current age? What might you be able to do to overcome or compensate for these challenges?
- What nurturing qualities do you possess now that you may not have had at the earlier age you envisioned?
- What will make the current you, the you that exists today, an excellent parent?

## *Embracing the Role of Older Mama*

*There's a wonderful sense of calm about being a mother in your 40s. I've done everything I wanted to do. Travelled, worked, lived in different cities—and I have no regrets. I don't ever look at other women and think, I wish I could've done that. And now I've become the most efficient version of myself. I get much more done in a day—maybe it's because I have no other choice. My son needs me, he has to eat, he has to have clean clothes, he has to exercise, and I have to work, so there's just no other option...*

*My mom was 39 when she had me, so maybe that's why I've never been worried about being an old mom. If the hardest thing for me is to be the oldest mom at [my child's] high school graduation, I'll take it. Who cares? I do think about my own mortality and not being there for my child. I've considered the fact that I might not be around after [he] is 40, but I hope to defy the odds."<sup>\*\*</sup>*

<sup>\*</sup> V.L. Ochs, *Sarah Laughed*. McGraw-Hill, 2005, 110–111.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Rebecca Philips, "The Mid-Life Moms Club: Five older moms described why they waited, how they conceived, and what it's like to have kids in your 40s." *Toronto Life*, 9 Nov. 2015, <https://torontolife.com/city/toronto-older-moms-kids-in-40s/>.



**Is being an older parent something you have thought about during your journey? How do you currently feel about that prospect?**

You may find that you have a vision of conception, pregnancy, and parenthood as being part of a “young” person’s life. This vision may be challenging for you, particularly if you consider yourself “older,” or if you believe that your age is an obstacle to being able to conceive and carry a pregnancy to term. You may also be concerned about being an older parent and how that might affect you and your child(ren).

Explore the following guided imagery. As you do so, consider your mental image of who is able to conceive and sustain a pregnancy. If you are not already in the picture, invite yourself in. Begin to shift that image of whom you imagine to be bearing children. (You may want to use this guided imagery in water such as a mikveh, shower, or ocean, or if that is not possible or desirable, to simply imagine yourself in water. Also, if you are not physically able to do any of these movements, you can close your eyes and envision yourself doing them, or substitute motions or images that serve you and feel like a reflection of and positive imagery for your own body.)

Breathe in and exhale, and slowly enter the water. Stand in the water with your head held high, your back in a healthy elongated alignment, and your legs long and straight. In your mind’s eye, envision yourself as the trunk of a date-palm tree, tall, sturdy, and strong.

Recite, chant, or sing the following verses from Psalm 92:13–14:

The righteous blossom like a date-palm; they thrive like a cedar in Lebanon; planted in the house of Adonai, they flourish in the courts of our God.

צְדִיק כְּתִמְר יִפְרַח כְּאֵרֶז בְּלִבְנוֹן יִשְׁגֶּה:  
שְׁתוּלִים בְּבַיִת יְהוָה בְּחִצְרוֹת אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִפְרִיחוּ:

*Tzaddik ka'tamar yifrach, k'erez bal'vanone yisgeh.  
Shetulim b'veit Ado-nai be'chatzrote Elo-heinu yafrichu.*

Reach into the water and begin to get your entire body wet.

*Start with your hair.* As you gently wet your hair, consider what it looks like. Perhaps you have a few gray hairs that have grown in the past few years. Appreciate all you have been through and all you have accomplished in order to obtain them. Tell yourself that you are beautiful, fertile, and full of youthful energy. Recite, sing, or chant the following words:

At a mature age they shall still bear fruit; rich with sap and freshness shall they be. (Psalm 92:15)

עוֹד יִנּוּבֹן בְּשִׁיבָה דְּשָׁנִים וְרַעֲנָנִים יְהִי:

*Ody'nuvun b'sayvah, d'shaynim v'ra'ananim yih'yu.*

*Now focus on your eyes.* Gently wet the outside of your eyes, consider their appearance. Perhaps there are some lines or slight darkness under your eyes. Appreciate all you have endured and accomplished in order to obtain them. Tell them they are beautiful, fertile, and full of youthful energy. Recite, sing, or chant the words from Psalm 92:15.

*Shift your focus to your mouth.* Gently wet your mouth and consider its appearance. Perhaps you have soft lines, evidence of all the laughing you have done in your life. Appreciate all you have endured and accomplished in order to obtain them. Tell yourself they you are beautiful, fertile, and full of youthful energy. Recite, sing, or chant the words from Psalm 92:15.

*Shift your focus once more, this time to your ovaries and your uterus.* Gently wet your abdomen and consider what your ovaries and uterus look like. Perhaps you feel as though your uterus is tired, broken, or aged, or your ovaries practically empty, with only a handful of eggs remaining. Place your hands on your belly, and send your uterus and ovaries warmth and energy.

Return in your mind's eye to that vision of yourself as the palm tree, tall, strong, and sturdy. You are not simply a date palm trunk—you are a flowering, beautiful, vivacious date-palm, and the

life force behind your blossoming stems from your ovaries and uterus. Repeat the verse from Psalm 92:15 once more, and remind your whole body that whatever your age, you can produce fruit. That fruit might be a baby, or it might be the creation of another path towards building your family, but there is fruitfulness in you.

Envision your ovaries and uterus full of sap and freshness. Picture in your mind's eye a flowering date-palm, and immerse your entire body. Inhale and exhale deeply, and exit the water when you feel ready.

## LAUGHTER

### *Fertility Fiasco at a Wedding*

*The timing for our very first IVF-related injection coincided with a wedding we attended. We went to the wedding all dressed up, with the syringe and medication in my purse, but without a clear plan as to how we were going to pull this off. It was almost the time when we needed to give the shot and the chuppah [the wedding ceremony] was just beginning. We looked all around for a private spot and the only place we could find was the yichud room (the room that the bride and groom use after the wedding for private time). After making sure that nobody was looking, we snuck in. My husband tried to mix the injection as fast as he could, but it was our first time and we were just trying to figure it out. Then we heard over the loudspeaker "honored with the next blessing..." followed by my husband's name. And of course we totally panicked! When we heard someone begin reciting the blessing, we quickly realized that there was someone else with my husband's very common Jewish name. After a sigh of relief, he gave me the injection and we got out of the yichud room as quickly as possible and walked in—separately—to the almost finished wedding ceremony. (Miri)*

**Have you had any moments during your journey that were so absurd, you just had to laugh? Have you had the opportunity to speak to other people struggling to grow their family and share such moments while laughing together?**

As unlikely as it may seem, humor can play an important role in your journey. It may even be a vital life-saving force during your struggle. Laughter is an important part of our lives and there is a time for it:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven...a time to weep, and a time to laugh. (Ecclesiastes 3:1,4)

לְכֹל זְמַן וְזְמַן וְעֵת לְכָל-תַּפְסָן תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם... עֵת לְבָכּוֹת וְעֵת לִשְׂחֹק

You may find that there are periods of time during your journey when you are suffering such emotional distress or feeling so much loss that laughter is a rarity in your life. If you do find the opportunity or the ability to laugh, take advantage of it. Finding laughter during the hard times this journey brings can be very healing.

Sarah found laughter along her journey when she overheard a messenger promising that she would bear a child.

## Genesis 18:12

And Sarah laughed within herself, saying: "After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord [Abraham] being old also?"

וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרַי בְּלִתִּי הֲיִתְהַלְּלִי עַדְנָה וְאֲדַנִּי זָקֵן

Over the years, biblical commentators have tried to understand the nature of her laughter. Was it an expression of disbelief, elation, nervousness, or sarcasm?

One midrash fills in some details: Sarah reflected on her physical condition and exclaimed, "Shall this womb bear a child and these dried-up breasts give forth milk?!" (*Midrash Tanchuma, Shoftim 18*)

In this version, 90-year old Sarah was laughing in sheer disbelief that her body could rejuvenate sufficiently to bear a child.

Perhaps you, too, have experienced a similar moment of disbelief even in the face of *good* news. Lots of bad news and accumulated hard times can take their toll and make it difficult to process, accept, and internalize any positive developments that take place. It may be hard to shift from the "time" you are in, to a more positive "time," shifting from crying to laughing, from mourning to celebration.

**Is there a “time” that you are worried you may get stuck in? If so, what “time” might that be? What “time” are you currently experiencing?**

Although there are a number of possible interpretations for Sarah’s laughter, it seems likely that it is not a purely joyous laughter. Perhaps it flowed from not from a dichotomous place, but a complex one, in which laughter and tears run together.

## SELF-CARE

### *A Time to Cry and a Time to Laugh*

A time to cry and a time to laugh... (Ecclesiastes 3:4)

You may want to work with the following guided reflection in writing.

Invite yourself to reflect on some of the experiences you have had during your journey that have brought you to tears or have caused you to laugh. You may want to use the journal prompts below as a guide, or even as a catalyst to write in whatever way you wish.

A TIME TO CRY:

*During my fertility journey,*

*I was brought to tears when:*

*I can’t believe I did not cry when:*

*This never used to make me cry:*

*For this I weep:*

A TIME TO LAUGH:

*During my fertility journey,*

*I found myself laughing when:*

*I can’t believe I laughed when:*

*This used to make me laugh:*

*About this, I laugh:*

You can explore the following guided imagery in the mikveh, bath, shower, or another body of water, or in your mind’s eye.

With your journal entries in mind, descend into the water. Feel its peacefulness and allow yourself a few long and nourishing breaths. Place your hands palms up beneath the water, such that they are fully immersed. Reflect upon what you wrote regarding “A Time to Cry.” You may want to envision some of the times that this journey has brought you to tears. If you find that tears flow while doing so, welcome them as a part of your healing process.

When you have finished, recite the following words:

A time to cry

*Et liukot*

עַתָּ לְבִכּוּת

Raise your hands, palms up, towards your face and gently wash water over your eyes. Repeat this action as many times as feels nourishing. While doing so, remind yourself that this journey is emotion laden, and filled with times to cry. Give yourself permission to cry when you feel drawn to do so. You may be taking hormones that cause you to cry more easily; accept that as a temporary reality. Forgive yourself for any tears that you wished you had not shed. Forgive yourself for any tears that you wished you had shed, but that did not come.

Bring the peaceful water to your eyes one more time. This time envision the water as rejuvenating tears—the kind that will heal, support, and nourish you as you go forth.

Inhale and exhale deeply. Place your hands, palms up, beneath the water again, fully immersed. Reflect upon what you wrote regarding “A Time to Laugh.” You may want to envision some of the times that this journey has caused you to laugh. If you find that laughter flows while doing so, welcome it as a part of your healing process.

When you have finished, recite the following words:

And a time to laugh

*Vet lischok*

וְעַתָּ לְשִׂחוֹךְ

Raise your hands, palms up, towards your face and gently wash water over your mouth. Repeat this action as many times as feels nourishing. While doing so, remind yourself that this journey is intense and stressful and sometimes you just need to laugh. Give yourself permission to laugh when you feel moved to do so. Forgive yourself for any laughter that you wished you had contained, or for any moments that you wished you had approached with a greater sense of humor but did not.

Bring the peaceful water to your mouth one more time, envisioning the water as rejuvenating laughter—the kind that will heal, support, and nourish you as you go forth.

When you feel complete, allow your hands to come back to your sides, breathe in and out, and come out of the water.

## *Laughter Yoga*

Another way to read Sarah's laughter is to consider that Sarah was so thrilled at this news that she laughed. And her laughter was actually part of the healing that took place in her body—part of what allowed her to become fertile and conceive.

Dr. Melila Helner-Eshed writes, "The laughter, too, appears as an important key in the narrative; one that brings about the close of the period of barrenness in Sarah's life. What is there in this laughter that opens her womb? The laughter reverses the natural progression of time and allows Sarah to merit rejuvenation in her old age and to once again [experience] the menstrual cycle. The laughter is also the one that gives a name to the son that will be born to her... Perhaps when Sarah laughed to herself, all of her internal organs laughed at the wonderful possibility that in her old age she will experience youth and female sexuality with her husband, Avraham, in such a way that she never experienced while biologically young... Laughter tears open wide the shut skies and the closed wombs. Maybe it turns upside down the normal perspective of reality and allows for something new and surprising, like it itself, to happen."<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup> Dr. Melila Helner-Eshed, "Akarut Shel Sarah." *Sipurei Resheit: Rav-Siach al she'elot enushiyot b'sefer Beresheit*, Tel Aviv: Yediot Achronot, Sifrei Chemed, 2002, p. 270.

With this notion of laughter as an agent of healing, invite yourself to explore the following exercise from a practice called laughter yoga, which encourages participants to laugh, thereby cultivating greater internal joy, despite whatever hardships they may be suffering.

You may enjoy exploring laughter yoga alone, or with a partner, loved one, or friend.

Envision yourself holding a jar of laughter pills or supplements. Hold out your hand such that it is encircling this ethereal jar of healing drugs. With your other hand, reach into the jar, take a tablet, and place it in your mouth. Pretend to swallow it, and after doing so, begin to laugh. The laughter is not likely to come naturally at first, but challenge yourself to say things like “he he ha ha,” for a while, and likely a more natural laughter will arise. Take as many pills as you need in order to bring yourself to laughter. When you have brought yourself to a state of natural laughter or when you feel finished, close up the jar and place it on the shelf for future use. Feel free to use it as often as you like and to take as many laughter pills/supplements as feels good to you.

## DOUBT

Laughter can also be an expression of doubt. You may doubt that the promises you are hearing from others, or the promises you are making yourself, will come true. You may feel that, despite the statistics that tell you that chances are you will get there, it is incredibly hard for you to believe. You may have doubt that feels so strong, it might not even be conquerable even if you were to get a direct message from God telling you that you will have a baby. Doubt can be a persistent fellow traveler who will not abandon you during this journey. It may bring into serious question all that you thought you always believed.



## Do I Still Believe?

*When I had my son, I knew he was my bashert. On his first birthday we began our journey toward a second child, which was plagued by an extensive series of unexplained pregnancy losses. As committed as I was to continuing my journey, I kept thinking about the words my husband's grandmother said to me after my first few miscarriages... "You have one beautiful healthy child, isn't that enough? Maybe this just isn't meant to be." Her statement stunned me. Was I misreading the signs that God was giving me? If everyone took their struggle as a sign to give up, there would be no such thing as fertility treatment. Though her comments troubled me, I believed it was right for us to continue our processes and although I was able to become pregnant several more times, I continually miscarried.*

*Then my sister offered to do an incredible mitzvah and be a gestational carrier for us. After eight stressful and emotional months prepping, the week of the transfer my sister suddenly developed appendicitis and required emergency surgery. I thought back to my husband's grandmother and could not stop wondering, how can THIS not be a sign? Yet, I marched on. Three months later, again poised for the transfer, my sister contracted pneumonia. This was very hard for us all and I cried a lot. When I was done crying, I cried even more. And yet I marched on.*

*I had two more miscarriages over the next two years, and my best friend offered to be our gestational carrier. In all ways this seemed perfect. However, a few days after a positive pregnancy test, she began to miscarry.*

*I reflected upon our situation: 14 miscarriages, two failed attempts with two different gestational carriers, two failed IVF attempt, and let's not forget, one amazing miracle child. Many existential questions came about. What is "meant to be" for my family? What is my bashert? Was God creating a path in one direction while I spent eight years trying a different path? If I tried just one more time, would I have succeeded in having a second child?*

*I'll never really know the answers to these questions, but I know, I don't want to lose any more time with my child and husband. I thought I had a hole in my heart for that unborn child, but my heart bursts when I think of the love I have for my husband and son, not to mention the incredibly supportive family, friends and community I have. Having gratitude was MY resolution. (Natalie)*

**Have you experienced a feeling of pervasive doubt during your journey? How have you responded to the nagging fears that can pop into your mind at any given moment?**

It is very common to experience doubt along your journey. You may question decisions you make, people you are working with, and the efficacy of certain treatments. Moreover, you may question whether or not you will ever be able to grow your family, or whether you should keep trying altogether. These doubts may be overwhelming and can impact your emotional wellbeing. Many people struggling to grow their family grapple with these doubts, and we process them in various ways.

Sarah had an advantage that we do not—she received a significant reassurance from God that she would have a child:

## *Genesis 18:14*

Is anything too difficult for Adonai? At the set time I will return to you, when the season comes around, and Sarah shall have a son.

הִיפְלֵא מִיְהוָה דְּבַר לְמוֹעֵד אֲשׁוּב אֵלַי כְּעֵת חַיִּיה וְלִשְׂרָה בֵּן:

Because we lack the opportunity to hear directly from God, and those who promise that “things will work out” lack the credentials to make that promise, we may look for signs and try to draw conclusions from them. We might think that a certain pregnancy will be successful because the transfer took place on a day that held a positive meaning. We might believe a particular IVF cycle is going to end in despair because we had a nightmare the night before retrieval. You may find that you are seeing “signs” everywhere and are starting to feel a bit overwhelmed.

Instead of looking for signs or believing in them, it might be more restorative to find an approach that allows you to meet doubt with a consistent *kavanah* or intention, a kind of mantra.

## SELF-CARE

### *Believe Fixing is Possible*

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, an 18th-century Hasidic master said: “If you believe breaking is possible, believe fixing is possible.”

Consider these words from Rabbi Nachman. It does not mean that your journey will end in any particular way, it just means that in the world we live in, fixing is possible. It is possible for us to make things better, to repair something that is broken, to improve a very difficult situation. *How do you feel about the idea that fixing is possible?*

“Believing” may feel far away right now. Perhaps you have had too many hopes end in devastation and failure. You may feel the need to protect yourself from the vulnerability that accompanies hope and optimism. Perhaps you are afraid to believe in anything, even in the best of moments, for fear of “jinxing” things.

If this resonates, perhaps the way forward can be a synthesis of belief and action. You may have experienced so many disappointments that trust feels impossible. Still, you move forward in pursuit of your goals, even if at times, it all feels like an impossibility, another failure in the making.

Yet it is significant that you take action, even as you struggle to believe that your actions will result in anything. If you find strength in the quote from Rabbi Nachman, you may want to recite it to yourself when you feel stuck, or before taking action in the face of grave doubt. You may find it helpful as a mantra or *kavanah* before you swallow another pill, undergo a procedure, meet a potential birth mother, attempt acupuncture, or have sex with your partner. Allow the words to open your heart up to possibility that fixing is possible in the most general way.

## MALE FACTOR AND SPERM DONATION

### *Finding Someone to Tell*

*I didn't notice my life receding at first. I was still going to class, still making plans with friends. But as time wore on, as we wound our way deeper and deeper into fertility treatments, I experienced life around me at an ever-greater remove. Sadness turned to suffering; suffering turned to anger; anger turned inward and then, when it couldn't consume any more of me, it turned back out again—at my wife, at friends and family, at the slightest provocation or setback. I had become so alienated from myself that I didn't even feel the anger. I didn't feel anything—and at the same time I felt a deep, unbearable suffering, a pain worse than anything I had known or imagined. And through all of this, of course, I said nothing.*

*What could I say? There was nothing to say, no one to hear, and no one who would understand anyway. My closest friends weren't even married, let alone thinking about having children. My friends with kids... Even my wife—literally in it with me—wouldn't understand. What did she know about being a man, a husband? How could she comprehend the shame, the impotence, the hollow feeling of eviscerated dreams? And so I suffered alone, and I was alone in my suffering.*

*One rainy November night, I sat in my friend's car at the end of a very long day. I knew I should open the door and let him go home. I wanted to reach for the door, to get out, to be alone again with my pain—and I also desperately wanted to stay there, in the dark quiet, rain washing over the windows, with a friend who had been, since childhood, closer than a brother.*

*Then I told him. He sat silently as it all poured out. Infertility. I said it. Sadness, anger, resentment, jealousy, shame, I said it all. I cried, washing me clean like the first winter rains. When I finished we sat again in the dark, and then we hugged. There was nothing more to say. I walked slowly to our apartment, feeling the rain drench my clothes and drip from my hair, mingling with my tears. That night in his car I began to mourn an easier life, a simpler life, imagining all of the "if onlys" and "might have beens," and a thousand hypothetical futures that weren't mine. [Isaac]*

So often fertility is discussed as a women's issue, and men are cast in the role of supportive partner. But many men also face biological challenges and struggle with their own fertility. They face fertility challenges firsthand, and may have a very different experience with this struggle than women do.

**How is this journey shaped by being male? Have you found other men to speak with about your fertility struggles? What are some of the more challenging emotions that you have felt? Have you felt shame, or experienced isolation? Where have you turned for comfort?**

The Torah does not include a character that openly struggles with male factor infertility; all of the fertility narratives focus on the women. However, there is one suggestion that issues with Abraham might also be a part of the couple's fertility struggle.

## Genesis 18:12–13

(12) And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?”

וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקוֹרְבָּהּ לְאִמְרָא אַחֲרַי בְּלִתִּי הֲיִתְהִלִּי עַדְנָה וְאֵדְנִי זָקֵן:

(13) Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָהָם לְמָה זֶה צִחְקָהּ שָׂרָה לְאִמְרָא אַחֲרַי אֲנִי זָקֵן וְאַנִּי זָקֵנָתִי:

In verse 12, Sarah follows her laughter with a comment that she is no longer fertile—and her husband is old as well. However, when God later relays Sarah’s comments to Abraham, God reports only Sarah’s comment about herself, not about Abraham.

Nachmanides (a 13th-century Spanish commentator on the Torah) wonders how God could justify being less than truthful, and offers this rationale: “...For the sake of (marital) peace, God did not want it revealed [to Abraham that Sarah] had said “and my husband is old.”

God seems to be protecting Abraham from hearing that Sarah doubted his ability to conceive. Why did God feel the need to change Sarah’s comment in order to preserve peace in their marriage? What would be challenging for Abraham about her comment? It appears that, despite the Torah’s basic presentation of fertility as connected to women’s bodies, even in biblical times there was a sense of male fertility challenges, which carried with them an element of shame. God may have been shielding Abraham from that shame.

Many of us experience feelings of shame at some point along our fertility journey. Men in particular sometimes describe a sense of shame around this issue because male procreation is often associated culturally with masculinity and sexual prowess. A man may feel his masculine identity is compromised because of a sperm anomaly, erectile dysfunction, or a whole host of other factors that make conception difficult. The accompanying sense of shame adds insult to injury (even as you know intellectually that your sense of masculinity *should* remain unaffected). Going against the grain of this cultural

imagery and overcoming these feelings can feel like a formidable task, but it is worth the effort and attention. Facing and working through, and past, these feelings can allow you a great sense of peace, and give you the fortitude to continue forward on your fertility journey.

## SELF-CARE

### *Who is Mighty*

One way to address any feelings of stigma is to contemplate your own understanding of masculinity. You may want to meditate or reflect on the following teaching from *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of Our Fathers 4:1: “Who is mighty? He who overcomes his inclination, as it says, ‘Slowness to anger is better than a mighty person, and the ruler of his spirit than the conqueror of a city.’” (Proverbs 16:32)

The ancient rabbis are committed to an ideal of true heroism that is achieved through moral, conscientious living, and mindfulness about one’s reactions. In this model, masculinity is not tied to your ability to procreate—to your sperm count, motility, or morphology. Rather, it is associated with the conscious decisions you make, over and against your reflexive reactions, the courage to face real challenges with intention.

This moving reminder can nevertheless be extremely challenging to internalize. Perhaps you have heard this message before. Do you believe it? It can be difficult to erode decades of distorted cultural messages. This is a long process; you may want to check in with yourself periodically to note how you are doing with understanding your own sense of masculinity, even heroism.

*How comfortable are you with others knowing about your fertility struggles? Are you affected by the boasts of other men (in person or on TV)? Do you still feel a sense of stigma attached to your diagnosis? What might help you deal with these feelings?*

Here is a meditation with guided imagery:

Breathe in and exhale three times. As you exhale, allow yourself to settle into a more comfortable position and a peaceful mental space. Ask yourself: Who is mighty?

Invite in your mind images of men that you admire. They may be people that you know personally, historical or religious figures, or people who have achieved fame or recognition for their accomplishments. As you think about these men, choose a few to focus on. Envision these men in your mind's eye. and ask yourself why you chose them. What character traits do they exhibit that place them in a heroic category for you? Do you possess any of these traits?

Now imagine that these men had a biological issue making it hard for them conceive. How does that impact your vision of them, if at all? Is their masculinity compromised in any way? When you feel like you have explored these questions, breathe in and exhale fully.

You may want to remind yourself of these men in low moments during your fertility struggle, and ask the question "who is mighty?" as a focus for meditation, as you work to further internalize a broader definition of might, heroism, and masculinity.

## *Nurturing without Biology*

If your situation is such that you are not able to use your own sperm to conceive your child. and will be using donor sperm, you will nevertheless be the father of this child. If you are raising your child and teaching them the ways of the world, then you are their parent, whether or not you have a genetic connection to them. Children do not love, admire, and feel forever bonded to a father because they received their genes from his sperm, but as a result of the love and nurturing that he shows them.

Think about your vision of yourself as a father, irrespective of biology. The following questions are intended to help you flesh out this vision:

- What is something that you love to do, which you would love to teach your child?
- What stories would you love to read to your child?
- What stories about your childhood and your life would you like to share with your child?
- What are some fun activities that you can envision doing with your child?
- What are some of your personality traits that you would like to pass on to your child?

## *My Daughter's Sperm Donor Is Not Her Father*

*Sometimes, but not often, I think about the other man. I wonder about him, about his life. What prompted him to make that first appointment at the sperm bank? ...When was he there? In that very same clinic where my husband and I sat and picked him off of a list?*

*I don't know if he's old or young. I don't know where he lives or what he does for a living. I don't even know if he's still alive. And then I find myself thinking about all the things he doesn't know. He doesn't know about my daughter. Doesn't know how she loves to read books. How bath time is her favorite time of the day. How her hair smells when she's sleeping. How it feels when those chubby little hands stroke my face. How she insists "No Mommy! Me do it!" He doesn't know when she was born, or where, or even that she was born at all.*

*When I mention that our daughter is the result of IVF with donor sperm, I often get questions about her father. What do I know about her father? Well, quite a bit! We've been married for almost 12 years...He is a kind, thoughtful, and good man. He cares. He loves her and he loves her mother. He is my husband and her father.*

*Oh, you meant the sperm donor? All we know about him is his height, weight, eye color, hair color, and blood type...And then there is the one thing I'm absolutely and completely certain I know about this man who is our anonymous sperm donor; he is not, nor will he ever be, our daughter's father.*

*Will she have questions about him as she gets older? Probably. And we probably won't have the answers she seeks... But we will be able to tell her that her mother and father love her more than the world, and that she is the light that brightens our every day.*

*The single microscopic cell that sparked her creation was an amazing gift. Without that gift, we wouldn't have this amazing little girl. But that cell isn't what makes a parent or a family.*



*You see, there are two men. The first is the man whose body generated that single cell. And then there is a second man. A man who held my hand for every ultrasound. Who talked to my pregnant belly. Who was in the room when my daughter was born. Who held her on that first day of her life and every day since. Who changes diapers and gives baths and pushes her on the swing. Who loves her and would do anything for her.*

*Her father.\**

*(Leora)*

**For women with partners: What do you think about when you consider how using a sperm donor will impact your potential child's relationship with their father/their other parent? Do you have any concerns about how it might impact your relationship with your partner?**

If you or your partner find yourselves struggling with questions about paternity if your child is conceived through a sperm donor, consider doing the following: For Jewish ritual purposes, a person's name is their first name followed by their parents' names. Referring to your future child with a direct reference to you and your partner may help you internalize the fact that your child will indeed be yours. You may want to use the Hebrew word for fetus, *ubar*, or you may want to give your child a nickname like "Junior" or "Peanut," using the formula:

[*Ubar* or nickname] *ben* (son of)/ *bat* (daughter of)  
[father's and/or mother's name.]

This practice may have value for you long before the child is born—especially if you encounter insensitive or emotionally draining questions about the paternity of the father. You may also find it helpful in strengthening the bonds of your partnership, especially in light of the different genetic roles you play in the creation of the child. It is not uncommon for partners to feel different degrees of comfort with sperm donation—or, for that matter, with egg donation.

\* Leora Elman, "My Daughter's Sperm Donor is Not Her Father." *Kveller*, 70 Faces Media, 15 March 2017, <http://www.kveller.com/my-daughters-sperm-donor-is-not-her-father/>.

## SURROGACY AND EGG DONATION

### *The Surprising Delivery*

*After years of failed IVFs and many heartbreaks, my husband and I decided to pursue surrogacy. One morning I was on the phone with a friend when I saw that something was being delivered to my front door. I went to see what it was while still in mid-conversation. It was flowers with a note that said, "Congratulations, you are expecting!" I thought, of course, my fertility journey is so replete with these painful moments, it is not surprising that this mistaken delivery about someone else's pregnancy arrives at my door. Then I read it again and noticed the signature and had a moment of shocking realization that it was from my gestational carrier. And she was pregnant with my child!*

*Immediately I phoned my husband—I was incredibly emotional and screaming rapidly because I was so excited. He could not understand what I was saying but just told me that whatever had just happened we would get through it together. I was finally able to speak clearly enough to tell him that it was actually good news, and that our surrogate was pregnant.*

*It was not an easy journey having our baby carried by someone else, since I could not know at every moment if our little one was ok. I made a habit of calling our gestational carrier every morning. One morning she did not answer. I began to panic, terrified that something had gone wrong with the pregnancy and my baby. She called me back a few minutes later and told me she had just been meeting with someone and that everything was ok. My gestational carrier realized that after everything I had been through, I would need constant reassurance that everything was ok with my baby. She was very supportive and conscientious about communicating with me, helping me throughout her pregnancy and birth, until the point at which I was able to hold my baby in my arms. (Julia)*

**Are you considering using a surrogate or gestational carrier? How do you feel about this prospect? What emotional healing do you most need as you explore this possibility?**

### *My Children Have Jewish Souls*

*When I was a teenager, my doctor warned me that I might face future reproductive issues. My fertility journey began with an early miscarriage that was said to be a chromosomal issue. My doctor referred me to a reproductive endocrinologist (RE) who was very supportive while we went on the hormonal roller coaster of IUI (intrauterine insemination). Soon, the RE*

*told us that due to very poor egg production and low ovarian reserve, I would not conceive on my own, nor was I a candidate for IVF. He identified three options for us: donor egg, adoption, or live child-free and “be great aunts and uncles”.*

*We decided that egg donation was the route for us. I was just happy to think that my husband’s genes would be within our child. We were successful with donor egg IVF and conceived within 6 months. Our son is a carbon copy of my husband and has so much of my personality in him. He is a miracle and makes my heart burst with love when I look at him.*

*I had to have faith to try and conceive again. A year after my son was born, we did another successful donor egg IVF and I gave birth to his sister.*

*Growing up as a religious Jew, I had many questions about whether my children were “technically Jewish” and needed to follow a halachic process after they were born for an unofficial conversion. I believe that my children, growing inside me, have Jewish souls. Donor egg donation is a gift beyond the scope of understanding. Without the kindness of the donors and the diligent folks in the medical field working tirelessly to enhance the IVF technology, we would not be parents today. (Rachel)*

**Are you considering using donor eggs? How do you feel about this prospect? What emotional healing do you most need as you explore this possibility?**

You may have come to a crossroad in your journey where you are considering using donor eggs or pursuing surrogacy. Both of these options are things that you are likely considering after many other attempts to conceive your child have not met with success. As you consider these options, you may want to ask yourself the following questions, being as honest with yourself as you can:

- What are some the images of parenthood that you long to experience?
- What role does a biological connection to your child play in your parenting dreams?
- How do you feel about the prospect of a potential child having a deeper biological connection to your partner than to you?
- If your child is conceived with a donor egg, what would make you feel like a child is truly yours?

Most people decide to pursue egg donation or surrogacy when they feel that the door is closed to using their own eggs and/or uterus. If you have arrived at that point in your journey, then you may be ready to begin looking for another woman to help you bring your child into the world.

## *Genesis 16:2*

While Sarah (whose name was first Sarai) was certainly not pursuing egg donation or surrogacy in any contemporary sense, she too reached a point at which she called upon another woman to help her become a mother.

And Sarai said to Abram, “Look, the LORD has kept me from bearing. Go please to my maid; perhaps I shall be built up through her.” And Abram heeded Sarai’s request. (Genesis 16:2)

וְתֹאמַר שָׂרָי אֶל־אַבְרָם הִנֵּה־נָא עֲצָרְנִי יְהוָה מִלָּדוֹת בְּאִנָּא אֶל־שִׁפְחָתִי  
אוֹלֵי אֲבִנָּה מִמִּנְהָ וְיִשְׁמַע אֲבָרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרָי׃

Rabbi David Kimchi (a 12th-century French commentator, also known as the Radak) wonders what Sarah might mean when she says “I will be built up through her,” and suggests that this indicates that Sarah intended to accept the child as if he were her own biological child.

Transitioning away from the vision with which you might have begun your journey, of both conceiving with your genetic material and carrying your baby in your own body, may be intense and very emotional. You may experience true mourning as you let go of those visions and dreams, and embrace a new reality. Give yourself permission to mourn as much as you need.

Here is a poem that may offer you some inspiration and an opportunity for reflection as you experience the losses and possibilities in this process:

## SELF-CARE

### *She Won't Have Your Eyes*

SHE WON'T HAVE YOUR EYES\*

by Naomi Less

Mom

I've got some news

I have to share with you

It's still early

It's still fragile

But I have to tell you

I told dad on the phone

And he said god bless you

But I still need to tell you

She won't have your eyes

She won't have your smile

She won't have your disposition

She won't have your laugh

She won't have your cheekbones

Or your graceful fingers

She won't have your height

Or your red freckles

Or your gorgeous figure

But she will have your name

Using donor eggs inevitably involves some mourning. You may find it helpful to express your feelings through writing—in a journal, a letter to a loved one (living or dead), poetry, prose—or art, or any other medium that offers you the space to process the feelings of loss.

\* Naomi Less, 2016, [www.naomiless.com](http://www.naomiless.com)

## Accepting a New Reality

Another aspect of this journey is accepting your new reality and pursuing this way forward toward your child. For some, this shift can be very challenging, and a process for which you might need some grounding and inspiration. You may find strength in the following song lyrics, even incorporating the song into your daily routine, perhaps starting or ending your day by saying or singing the lyrics to yourself or your partner. Or maybe you will reach for them when you are about to take the next step in your journey, or find them a source of comfort and inspiration if you face a setback.

### BECAUSE OF THE SPIRIT\*

What will be, will be	<i>Yihyeh ma sheyihyeh</i>
I will still change	<i>ani od ashaneh</i>
I will fulfill my dream	<i>ani agshim et chalomi</i>
The bearers of bad news,	<i>Nos-ei b'sorah ra-ah makot o</i>
plagues or another decree	<i>od g'zerah</i>
will not change who I am	<i>lo y'shanu et mahuti</i>
You and I and God beside me	<i>Ani at v'ha-el shel'tzidi</i>
will succeed	<i>od n'natze-ach</i>
Not because of power	<i>Lo biglal hako-ach</i>
but because of the wind	<i>rak biglal haru-ach</i>
that blows at my back	<i>hanoshevet b'gabi</i>
The spirit inside me, in my mind,	<i>Rak biglal haru-ach b'tochi b'mochi</i>
in my soul	<i>b'nishmati</i>

Even though you are on a new and unexpected path, you are still moving towards your dream. You are the driving force, your spirit guiding this process forward. The Hebrew word *ruach* in this song, translated here as both wind and spirit, is also associated with God's presence. Consider the possibility that as you work towards building your family, you are accompanied by something larger in the universe from which you can draw strength.

\* Shlomi Shabat, "Machrozet Biglal Haruach," *Echad Lanshama Echad Lamesiba (Hofaa Haia Beksarya)* (A.M Music Productions / Shlomi Shabat Productions, LTD, 2013) Digital file.

## Choosing Wisely

Whether you are pursuing egg donation, surrogacy, or both, you will be asked to make a number of decisions in the process of finding the correct woman or women to help you try to bring a baby into the world. The process of selection can be overwhelming and bewildering.

You may draw inspiration from, or feel centered by reading, this a line from the daily Amidah, the “standing prayer” (at the core of traditional Jewish prayer), which asks for deep intuition and understanding:

You graciously favor humans with knowledge and teach mortals understanding. Favor us with knowledge, understanding, and discernment.

אַתָּה חוֹנֵן לְאָדָם דַּעַת. וּמְלַמֵּד לְאִנוֹשׁ בִּינָה:  
חֲנִינוּ מֵאִתְּךָ דַּעָה בִּינָה וְהַשְׂכִּיל

*Ata chonen l'adam da-at, umlamed le-enosh binah.*

*Choneinu me-it'cha de-ah binah v'haskel*

## Building Connection

You may reach the point in your journey when you are pregnant using a donor egg, or your surrogate is pregnant (using your egg, hers, or a donor egg). While this is likely to be a very exciting and possibly an incredibly anxiety-provoking time, it may also be a time when you experience new form of doubts. You may find you are concerned about how bonded you will be with your baby. In the case of egg donation, you may question whether or not the lack of genetic connection will always feel like a barrier between you and your child. In the case of working with a surrogate, your concerns about bonding may focus on wondering if missing out on the pregnancy experience will deprive you and your future child with a type of connection you can't make up.

If these questions are on your mind, you may want to take time before your child is born to process these feelings, and to consciously work on

nurturing your strong bond with your child. The verse below from Hosea 2:21 provides some possibilities. It uses the word “betrothed,” which technically refers to the engagement of a couple or the first stage of the marriage ceremony. However, in the biblical context, it is referring to God’s enduring bond with the Jewish people, and can be understood here in a more general way as a kind of intense bonding, creating an eternal connection. This verse is recited by those who wear *tefillin* in daily prayer, as they wrap the strap around their fingers.

Some of you may find it comforting and appealing to explore the following guided imagery in your mind’s eye, or while placing your hands on your pregnant belly, or even on your surrogate’s if this is possible:

Close your eyes. Inhale and exhale deeply. In your mind’s eye, picture your child at whatever developmental stage they are in right now. Perhaps you are seeing a tiny embryo, or more of a fully developed fetus. Imagine gently enveloping them in your arms, and bringing them close to your chest—even rocking them back and forth, and placing them close to your heart such that you can feel each other’s hearts beating.

Recite or sing the following words:

I will betroth you to me forever; and I will betroth you to me in righteousness, and in justice, and in lovingkindness, and in compassion. (Hosea 2:21)

וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי לְעוֹלָם וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי בְצֶדֶק וּבִמְשָׁפֵט וּבְרַחֲמִים:

*V'erastich li l'olam v'erastich li b'tzedek uvmishpat uvchesed uvrachamim*

You may want to add your own words to your child.

When you feel done, continuing with this imagery, rock them to sleep, gently lift them from your chest, and place them softly back in the uterus. Tell them that you will hold them again soon, and they should sleep peacefully. Inhale and exhale deeply. Open your eyes.