

# Introduction

In the beginning, God wastes no time. God creates the world in a mere six days. As soon as God creates human beings “male and female, God created them” (Genesis 1:27), God bestows upon them the first commandment in the Torah: “Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth” (Genesis 1:28).

From the moment we enter the world, we are created with the expectation that human beings will create new life and populate the world. That expectation can be immensely meaningful for those who can and choose to fulfill it, and utterly heartbreaking for those who struggle to do so.

There is often a real and wide gap between those who know this challenge intimately and those who have been blessed to view it only from afar—between those who have seen the negative sign on a pregnancy test over and over and over, and those who have so often seen the elating plus sign; between those who have suffered late-term miscarriages, and those who have always felt safe to share the news that they are pregnant early on; between those who spend tens of thousands of dollars on IVF without success, and those who get pregnant without even trying. This gap is actually expressed in the different language used by the ancient rabbis in referring to a woman’s womb. Two Hebrew words are used: *rechem* and *kever*. The more common term, *rechem*, comes from the same root as “compassion”—but there are other instances in which the rabbis refer to a womb as a *kever*, a grave. They may be using this shocking language simply to describe the close quarters the fetus is experiencing—or perhaps their distressing choice of words comes to include those who experience repeated difficulty conceiving, pregnancy loss, or stillbirth. By using both of these terms, we react to the challenge of the first commandment with the implicit recognition of the wide range of personal fertility narratives within our communities. Whatever one’s personal experience, someone else has been in a similar situation, known their heartache and shared their pain. Nobody should be made to feel alone simply because they can’t easily “be fruitful and multiply.”

Yet often, we do feel alone. The struggle to conceive can be unbearably isolating. Interacting with both Judaism as a religion and the Jewish people as a community can be challenging when one is having trouble growing one's family. For many, this is a time in life when they need religion and community most—to hold them, literally and metaphorically, to support them in all ways, and to guide them on a healing path. When those expectations are not met, we may feel isolated, defeated, frustrated, angry, and heartbroken.

Facing Fertility: A Jewish Healing Guide, comes to offer support, inspiration, and healing. Connecting the reader to biblical and rabbinic texts as well as contemporary voices provides the reminder that people have been struggling with infertility since ancient times. Across space and time, you are not alone.

There are many moments along your path when you may need to make a choice. Should I pursue the medical route, or persist without interventions? Should I try to become a single parent, or wait to have children until I find a spouse, even as I am conscious of my age? Should I try to adopt a child who will look like me or be open to all races? Do I share what I am going through with others, or do I keep this struggle private? We hope that in those moments, this guide will provide you with a sense of companionship in its pages.

You will notice that the language of fertility “journeys” is often used here. It may help to relate to your fertility struggle as something you are actively traversing. Though you do not know how, when, or what your final destination will look like, one day you will arrive. Your travels will likely know deep valleys, muddied waters, and forks in the road, and you will likely not want to walk entirely alone. You have the ability to choose wise, nurturing, and compassionate guides to be there beside you. We hope that this is one of those companions that you turn to along your way.

For wherever you are on your journey, it is our deep desire that—in the words of *Tefilat haDerech*, the “Traveler’s Prayer”—you may be “guided in peace, have your steps directed in peace, be supported in peace, and be led to (your) desired destination in health and joy, and peace.

## *How to Use This Guide*

Along the fertility journey, we need opportunities for healing—emotionally, spiritually, and physically. That means something different for each of us, and it may mean a number of different things to you at different times. Perhaps you have just started to dream of a child; perhaps you are in the midst of a particular path toward that end; perhaps you are feeling hopeless along the way; or perhaps you have moved past the stage of actively pursuing pregnancy but are forever impacted by your past experiences. In this guide, you will find the stories of others, both ancient and contemporary. So many people have struggled, and narratives serve as powerful reminders of that reality.

This healing guide is structured loosely around five biblical narratives and the contemporary issues they highlight. Each chapter includes a number of topics that are explored through personal narratives, text study, prayers, guided imagery, and opportunities for personal reflection.

Sometimes, we need words—words to react to God, words to react to people (strangers, friends, family members, and spouses), words to describe our pain, and words to mourn the loss of a life, or even of a particular vision for our future. This guide offers sacred words from a variety of places within Jewish life, including some passages written just for this volume. While there may be suggestions in particular places for meditation or writing, the words in this volume are here for you to use in whatever capacity you find useful—for reflection, journaling and other writing, prayer, drawing or other artwork, ritual, or discussion.

You may want to set aside a special journal to use along with this guide, to note your reactions, questions, feelings, and thoughts. You may want to find music to listen to as you reflect; most of the songs mentioned here are available on YouTube, Spotify, iTunes, and other electronic platforms. Music can be an important source of healing and comfort.

Prayers, Jewish texts, and opportunities for reflection may offer spiritual support at a time when one's spirit can be deflated and one's relationship with God or the sacred may be strained. Guided imagery or suggestions for movement may even offer physical support, allowing the body to explore new paths.

We invite you in using this guide to consider reading chapters and sections that do not relate directly to your journey, since they may touch upon common emotional challenges that will resonate for you as well. You may find yourself skipping some passages or sections, and returning to others again and again.

A final chapter of this guide is especially for loved ones of those on a fertility journey.

A glossary is provided to identify terms and figures from Jewish tradition and culture.

Please note that all of the names attached to the personal narratives are pseudonyms except where work has already been attributed in the public sphere. Although there should be no shame in struggling to conceive, there are those who wish to keep their personal journeys private. The narratives are sometimes excerpts of longer stories. To read the longer versions of some of these narratives, please visit [www.weareuprooted.org](http://www.weareuprooted.org).

## *Sacred Language*

God has many names in Jewish tradition and life—Creator, The Place, The Holy One, The Eternal, Redeemer, *Shechinah* (the in-dwelling feminine image of God), The Source of Life, along with many other names, both ancient and contemporary.

In this volume, we have simply used God, or Adonai (which is a substitute for the pronunciation of the four-letter name of God—composed of the Hebrew letters *yud*, *heh*, *vav*, *heh*—reserved, according to ancient practice, for the High Priest in the ancient Temple).

Let the God language here serve for you as a placeholder for your own understanding of God, of the sacred, of whatever inspires, nurtures, and grounds you as you go through life. If the language in this volume works for you as written, wonderful. When it doesn't, let it point you in the direction of whatever imagery does work for you. If any notion of God

feels foreign or distant, let the language here invite you into a space of contemplation of mystery and of life itself.

May you find comfort, courage, insight and inspiration in the wisdom and language of our tradition and our people, and may you be blessed with a sense of shalom, of peace.