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Hidden Heartbreak: The secret pain of miscarriage in the Jewish community

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December 14, 2015

THESIS: While there are signs that the Jewish community is beginning to acknowledge and assist women dealing with miscarriage, Jewish women experience distinct challenges when confronting the loss of a child through miscarriage.

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In Jewish law a child is not considered to be its own person until it reaches 30 days old: “Those that are to be redeemed of them from a month old shalt thou redeem (Num. 18:16),’ since prior to thirty days it is not certain that he will survive.”¹ Miscarriage is a common loss that women experience but one that receives little discussion. Within the Jewish community pregnancy loss is a very taboo subject. We are going to explore what challenges Jewish women currently face when dealing with this difficult issue and how the Jewish community might help them cope with this grief. While there are signs of improvement in how this is presently handled, there is more that can be done.

When a woman has a miscarriage, she typically experiences grief, guilt and confusion. In the Jewish community women face an additional challenge; this is that their unborn child is not considered to be a person. As stated in Jewish text “We do not mourn for fetuses and anything which does not live for 30 days, we do not mourn for it.”² In the Judaism a child that does not live to be 30 days old is not required to be given the same burial rituals as others. According to The United Synagogue Burial Society: “In cases of late-term miscarriage, stillbirth or when a child dies under the age of thirty days, shiva is not observed and there is no requirement that Kaddish be recited”.³ “Any child that lives to the age of thirty days is considered a person who

¹ Rosner, Dr. Fred. “The Beginning of Life in Judaism.” *Myjewishlearning.com*

Web.6.December. 15

² *Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Aveilut 1:6*

³ *theus.org/uk* The United Synagogue Burial Society. Web. 6. Sept.2015.

must be given regular burial. Before that age no formal burial is required and, of course, no burial services.”⁴

During my research of this topic I spoke with 11 members of the Jewish community. They ranged from Rabbis, teachers, social activist, medical professionals and students. Each had articulated clear reasons for the emergence of the 30-day law.

One reason that my interviewees offered was that this law came to be because the child at this point is still part of its mother: “It’s not a child yet because it has not developed enough to have feelings emotionally or physically”.⁵ Another similar view states that the child has not yet been given a soul: “Before 30 days there is no soul assigned to the embryo yet and it is gender less anatomically, not genetically”.⁶

Another explanation that stood out to me the most during my interviews attributed the development of the 30-day law to gender inequality. It was explained to me during an interview that because men had solely occupied religious and political positions that until recently the loss of a child was not seen as an emotional loss: “The religion has a history of being chauvinistic. Men did not deal with the loss the same way, and so they did not see this as a loss to be mourned”.⁷

The most common explanation for the 30 day law concerned economic reasons. Before medical advancements miscarriage was more common. The Jewish tradition of sitting Shiva

⁴ Freehof, Solomon. “*Modern Reform Responsa*” The Hebrew Union College Press 1971 pg.223

⁵ Shelia Maggos, Personal Interview October 19th 2015

⁶ Ella Jones, Personal Interview October 29th 2015

⁷ Mike Crain Personal Interview October 5th 2015

requires people to be out of work while mourning. People are not able to sit Shiva for each miscarriage because they cannot afford it: “It would not be reasonable of them of them to take off of work for these times”.⁸This thought was reiterated by another of my interviewees who stated “Because the infant mortality rate was so high this law came about so people would not have to sit Shiva every time this occurred.”⁹ This explanation suggests that this law was not in place because people did not feel grief for this loss, but because of a desire to protect families from financial hardships during this time.

In addition to the 30 day law, Jewish folklore also touches on the issue of miscarriage with the concept of the evil eye, according to which observant Jews should avoid celebrating or anticipating a child’s birth before it occurs. For example I found out during my research that Jewish women do not follow the common tradition of having a baby shower: “The baby shower *mishegas* is an outright invitation to the evil eye to descend upon the unborn baby in vengeance for rubbing your happiness in others’ faces and “counting your chickens before they hatch.”¹⁰ When speaking with my interviewees, I found that this belief is still held by many in the Jewish community: “You are not supposed to celebrate something that you do not already have. This is saying that you are ungrateful for what God has already given you”.¹¹ Others have told me that the evil eye is brought about due to jealousy. People do not want to let others know what they have until it is concrete because that person may have bad feelings toward them: “Because

⁸ Candice Payne Personal Interview October 4th 2015

⁹ Rabbi Rebecca Miles Personal Interview October 29th 2015

Mishegas” Def. craziness www.koshernosh.com Web. 24.Nov.2015

¹⁰ Saranow Schultz, Jennifer. “Miscarriage, Superstition and the Jewish Baby Shower.” *New York Times* (New York) 21 2 2014: Page 1. Print

¹¹ Mike Crain Personal Interview October 5th 2015

people hold grudges there is something along the way of karma anyone you may have wronged even if unintentionally you must ask for forgiveness because you don't want that to carry ill will toward you".¹² I learned that this belief is so deep rooted that some individuals won't even say how many family members they have for fear that this will create jealousy.¹³ When I questioned what brought about this belief, I learned that it was another way to protect the parents: If something does go wrong with the pregnancy it would be harder for the parents to get through this time if they have set up the baby's room. The fewer things to remind them of the pregnancy would be best for them."¹⁴ This belief in the evil eye makes it more challenging for Jewish women who miscarry because it can cause them to place blame on themselves if they celebrated the unborn child and then it does not survive. Even if she has no memory of doing anything to provoke the evil eye, she may still be inclined to assign blame to herself.

Another interesting folklore that I learned about during this research is the Jewish conception of reincarnation: "Work left uncompleted in this life is undertaken again in a future life until the task of transformation is done. Reincarnation is a fundamental tenet of Kabbalah".¹⁵ This was explained to me as a way for souls to atone for any sins or wrongdoing they had committed in their previous life.

The following story about reincarnation that I was told explains it very clearly. There was a young couple who deeply wanted children and could not conceive. They went to their Rabbi and asked for his help. Shortly after this the couple conceived. They had two wonderful years

¹² Brittany Michaels, personal interview October 26th 2015

¹³ Brittany Michaels, personal interview October 26th 2015

¹⁴ Rabbi Rebecca Miles Personal Interview October 29th 2015

¹⁵ Kabbalah Centre. Reincarnation Kabbalistic Concepts. livingwisdom.kabbalah.com/reincarnation. Web.2.Nov.2015

with their child before the child passed away. The couple was heartbroken and went to their Rabbi to demand answers. The Rabbi explained to them that this child only had 2 years to live because that is how long the soul had to atone. He continued to tell the couple that they had been chosen to have this child for the short time that she needed to live. God knew that this couple would love the child so much in their short time with her that her soul's mission would be completed.¹⁶ This explanation tells us that God chooses people to experience miscarriage or the death of a child not as punishment, but because the parents would help this soul: "This is an opportunity to have a soul that is so close to perfection that it does not need to stay for a whole life cycle to reach that".¹⁷ During an interview one Rabbi told me that the soul must atone for negativity that it had in its previous life.¹⁸ His explanation was that: "If in your previous life you cause 1000 frowns, then in your next you may come back as a baby because they cause so much happiness. Once you have caused 1000 smiles your soul has completed its journey. This is why some people miscarry; the soul completed its mission without having to be born again."¹⁹ Although this teaching allows Jewish women to find a meaning when a miscarriage happens, it's based on the Kabbalah, a medieval text and is not a part of Jewish law.

While Jewish law and folklore have shaped and complicated how Jewish women experience miscarriage, the dynamics of the Jewish community in the present-day U.S. also impacts Jewish women experiencing miscarriage. For example, in the Jewish community there is a deep emphasis on having a family: "Procreation is a primary aspect of family in the Jewish

¹⁶ Marcus Cramer, personal interview November 6th 2015

¹⁷ Marcus Cramer, personal interview November 6th 2015

¹⁸ Rabbi Joel Moore, personal interview October 29th 2015

¹⁹ Rabbi Joel Moore, personal interview October 29th 2015

tradition. It is the cornerstone of marital life.”²⁰ Furthermore Rabbi David Rosen elaborates on the importance of children: “Children are regarded as the hope of the future in every society, yet among the Jewish people this concept is enhanced by the view that children are a divine trust and guarantors of the future.”²¹ When someone is unable to produce children they can feel very isolated from their community. This worsens the grief of couples who experience a miscarriage because of this societal expectation.

There is also a common belief in the Jewish community that the parents were to blame for their unborn child’s premature death: “People are not in God’s favor. They are expecting something rather than being grateful for what God has given them already.”²² This sentiment was echoed in another interview that I conducted: “Something is wrong with the couple. They have done something wrong that makes God not favor them.”²³ Along with dealing with this loss, couples going through this also worries that they have displeased God and are therefore reluctant to turn to their community for support, which also isolates them further.

In fact, I learned that miscarriage is a taboo subject in the Jewish community. Most people looked at me strangely and would question whether or not I was Jewish when I asked them to interview with me. I encountered resistance when making attempts to set up interviews for weeks. Then one day I decided to go to a local Jewish community center in order to find individuals to participate in my research. When I went in I was greeted warmly by the front desk

²⁰ Ornstein, Debra. *Life Cycles: Jewish Women on life passages and personal milestones*. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994 pg. 198

²¹ Rosen, Rabbi David. “How Children are Valued in the Jewish Tradition” www.rabbidavidrosen.net . 12.October.2004. Web. 21.Nov.14

²² Candice Payne Personal Interview October 4th 2015

²³ Mike Crain Personal Interview October 5th 2015

staff. I informed them that I was a Religious Studies student and was interested in learning more about Jewish culture. The staff members told me that they would like to help me and asked what specifically I wanted to learn. As I described the topic of my paper the mood changed. They were no longer interested in assisting me in my research. I was told that they couldn't offer me any insight into this subject. I asked if I could leave a flyer that I created in case anyone would be willing to speak to me. That request was denied.

While I am, an outsider looking into their culture and traditions, I was very surprised at the immediate inability to speak about the topic. This made me curious as to how women within the culture were able to navigate through their feelings during this time. Do they experience the same difficulty? Or is it less taboo for them because they are a part of the culture and I was intruding? This is a question that I kept in mind throughout my research.

Another relevant issue that impacts how Jewish women in the U.S. experience miscarriage is abortion. A survey stated that 50% of Americans report that they are pro-choice.²⁴ Living in a society that accepts abortion so freely must have a negative impact on those who experience miscarriage. Since many people support ending a pregnancy, it would make it more difficult for someone who had this happen unexpectedly to come forward.

Coincidentally while researching this topic, I learned about National Miscarriage Day. This was not something that I sought out to learn about, but rather I discovered it on social media. Normally I would have scrolled past something like this without giving it a second thought. I realized that the only reason that I paid it any attention was due to this project. That is

²⁴ <http://www.kofc.org> Marist Poll. Web. 22. Nov.2015

when I realized that I am also part of the problem. Along with the countless others in our society, I don't discuss or pay attention to miscarriage.

The custom of women in the U.S. of withholding news of their pregnancies makes matters more difficult for women experiencing miscarriage. This is strictly followed in the Jewish community: "You don't talk to anyone outside of immediate family about pregnancy until the end of the first trimester".²⁵ When people are not aware that you were pregnant they cannot help with you cope with the fact that you no longer are.

The language that we use to talk about miscarriage can also discourage women from discussing this. The term itself is defined as "miscarriage- the expulsion of a fetus from the womb before it is able to survive independently. The unsuccessful outcome of something planned".²⁶ The meaning of the word does not state that this is a child, possible life, or anything that could be of importance. It does not fully explain what is occurring. When people discuss this topic with each other they also tend to minimize what has happened. Women use phrases like "I lost a child." This implies blame. This implies that the mother did something wrong and perhaps did something to cause the miscarriage. However, pregnancy loss is not the same as a child running away at the grocery store. This is a loss that is out of the mother's control. People often attempt to comfort the grieving mother by offering them what they think is hope for the future. Statements such as "You can always try again" or "Everything happens for a reason" are commonly heard. While these things may be true, it takes away from the severity of the loss.

²⁵ Brittany Michaels, personal interview October 26th 2015

²⁶ "Miscarriage" Def.2. Oxforddictionaries.com, Oxford Press, n.d. Web.24.Nov.2015

Phrases like these make it seem as though the loss the couple is currently experiencing is not valid.

When I began to research this topic, I was looking for “Jewish miscarriage.” This did not provide me with many results. One of the first people who agreed to speak with me offered me some insight to this. She suggested that I change how I was phrasing the loss. She suggested that I look under “Jewish pregnancy loss.” It was very surprising how much more information the second search provided. I found this to be one of the many built in ways that the Jewish community helps those who are experiencing this loss. They pay attention to the language they use surrounding it. This is different from the language we generally use in American culture. When Americans use the word miscarriage it sounds very technical. The Jewish community using the phrase pregnancy loss makes has a much more personal implication. The difference in how this is expressed can make it more difficult for women dealing with this because when it is defined as miscarriage it takes away from the personal loss.

I would now like to move on to the signs of improvement the Jewish community has shown in handling miscarriage. When discussing this topic with my interviewees, I asked why this loss is now being discussed when it had not been in the past. I had a variety of answers to this but one thing that came up continually was that women are now in higher positions in society. It was also brought up that there has been more of a discussion surrounding women’s health in general: “They want to be seen as equals and validated.”²⁷ Gender equality was brought up to me in another conversation: Women have had a more active role in decision making: “There has been an increase of women rabbis.”²⁸ It was explained to me that women

²⁷ Mike Crain Personal Interview October 5th 2015

²⁸ Candice Payne Personal Interview October 4th 2015

have fought to have equal rights, and with this they want people to talk more about not only their freedoms and rights but also their health.

Due to medical research being available to show us how common miscarriage actually is, this gives more opportunity for the topic to be discussed. Levy states: “Anywhere between 20 and 30 confirmed conceptions end in miscarriage.”²⁹ With women having a more prominent role in the medical field, female patients now have access to female doctors.

I would now like to take a closer look at how Jewish women are handling this loss in order to demonstrate that progress within the Jewish community is being made. This is a very delicate topic and those experiencing this have to face not only the loss of their unborn child, but they also must learn how to cope with it in their own way. During an interview, I was told that speaking with a Rabbi about a ceremony for an unborn child was very controversial. When I asked why this was, my interviewee replied: “It’s just not something that you bring up.”³⁰ This is not the case for everyone; some individuals who have experienced this loss were comforted by their Rabbi. When speaking with an individual whose wife had experienced a miscarriage I learned a different perspective. In this case the Rabbi came to their home to speak with the women after the loss. This woman did not want to have to face the community, and so her Rabbi came and did a private prayer service with her.³¹

From my readings and interviews I have learned that the Jewish community has found ways to deal with miscarriage privately. “Mourning rituals for miscarriage are not recorded in out

²⁹ Levy, Yamin. *Confronting the loss of a baby: A personal and Jewish Perspective.* Jersey City: NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1998 pg.35

³⁰ Candice Payne Personal Interview October 4th 2015.

³¹ Mike Crain Personal Interview October 5th 2015

ancient texts; many have been created by Jewish women.”³² Though women are mourning this loss, it is not something that they discuss publicly very often. In one of my interviews, a husband was describing how his wife handled this: “She did not feel that she should have to talk in front of our synagogue about what she was dealing with, she just wanted to get through it privately.”³³

I discovered that Jewish women are dealing with this loss in their own ways. One common way of dealing with the grief is through planting. The idea behind this is that the lifecycle of the plant is supposed to represent the cycle of grieving. A woman who recently experienced a miscarriage described her thoughts about this in stating: “It made sense to dig in order to sow rather than to bury. What was there to bury?”³⁴

There are a few variations to this practice. One is to plant a garden that contains perennials for the family members that are living and to plant one vibrant annual to represent the child that did not survive. This is to symbolize that the pregnancy was meaningful to the family, and also to give a time period in which to grieve. “This was the time, from planting to dying, in which I was to grieve and stop grieving.”³⁵ Another way this is done is by having each planted flower be a perennial. This is to symbolize that though the child did not survive, he or she is still alive in memory. By having the flowers grow in each year it gives the parents a chance to reflect on where they child would have been developmentally that year. The gardening does not have to be done with flowers. For example, this can be done is by planting an aloe plant, because it is a plant of healing. When the plant starts to produce leaves, you and your partner break off a leaf and put the aloe into your palms. According to Cardin, the following is said “May you be a

³² Rabbi Goldie Milgram. *Relcainingjudaism.org*. Jewish Miscarriage Ritual Web. 6.Sept. 15

³³ Mike Crain, personal interview, October 5th 2015

³⁴ Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin [Tears of Sorrow, Seeds of Hope](#) (Vermont, Jewish Lights 1999) pg. 81

³⁵ Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin [Tears of Sorrow, Seeds of Hope](#) (Vermont, Jewish Lights 1999)pg.81

spring that soothes the thirst of gardens, and a gathering of the waters of life.” (Based on Song of Songs 4:15)³⁶.

Baking has also been adapted to become part of this healing process. Cardin says the art of kneading, braiding, waiting, and feeding-all connected through wordless action and dedication to the sacred task of making Shabbat bread.³⁷ The baking process has been closely associated with the transitions during pregnancy. When the necessary ingredients come together it is purposeful. They are put together in a warm place and covered in hopes that what you are making will turn out. This can be calming to a woman dealing with this loss because the baking of challah bread is an intensive process and she must schedule time to complete it. One woman who used this method to get through her grief stated: “Creating challah is about nesting and expectation, about creating home for my family.”³⁸ In this case the woman was baking the bread to bring together the family that she had and to remember the family member that they had lost.

Many women use poetry to get them through this time. They will write a letter or poem to the child that they no longer have. As described in *Tears of Sorrow, Seeds of Hope*, these poems are not just written by the mourning mother. Fathers, grandparents and even close friends may take part in this in order to remember the child who was lost.³⁹

There are not any specific prayers for miscarriages: “A miscarriage doesn’t qualify as a death in Jewish law, so a woman doesn’t say the Kaddish, the mourning prayer, for a dead embryo.”⁴⁰ Because there is no formal mourning required for miscarriage there are no specified

³⁶ Cardin 1999pg.87

³⁷ Cardin 1999pg. 85

³⁸ Cardin 1999 pg.85

³⁹ Cardin 1999 pg.152-156

⁴⁰ “The Invisible Baby Killer” *Keller.com* Web. 6 Sept. 2015

prayers to be recited. Jewish women have made adaptations to already established mourning prayers to help them cope with their loss. Friday evening is a time for reflection. Many couples use this time to light a candle. “As we light the Shabbat candles, we cross the threshold from time to eternity.”⁴¹ This is a time to reflect on the loss that they experienced and to say a prayer together: “Bringing more light into this world is a very powerful, especially when we feel surrounded by our own darkness.”⁴² A common prayer to be recited is one that tells you to move on. “To sanctify this moment of transition to the next phase of your lives, we invite you to take part in the life of our people by choosing the mitzvah of tzedakah (sacred practice of charity), even in this time of pain.”⁴³ These prayers can be done privately between the couple or among a small group of close friends and relatives.

Another way in which a Jewish woman can cope with this loss is to have a spiritual bath known as a mikveh. This is a long used Jewish purification rite. “Immersion in the waters of the *mikveh* provided a means of transforming an individual (male or female) from a state of ritual impurity to a state of purity.”⁴⁴ This was brought up to me in many interviews that I conducted, but one interviewee had an explanation that stuck out to me. As a Rabbi, she suggests to people to go to the mikveh. She said “This would create a separation for them from being pregnant to not being pregnant.”⁴⁵ The realization of not having the child anymore is very difficult to process. This cleansing is a way for them to regroup and to move forward.

⁴¹ Cardin 1999 pg.86

⁴² “What Happens to My Miscarried Child’s Soul?” *Chabad.org* Web.6.Sept.2015

⁴³ Rabbi Debra Orenstein. [Lifecycles-Jewish Women on life passages and personal milestones](#). Vermont, Jewish Lights 1998

⁴⁴ Beth Wegner “Mikveh” *jwa.org* Web.6. Nov. 2015

⁴⁵ Rabbi Rebecca Miles Personal Interview October 29th 2015

There are no traditional burial services when mourning a miscarriage. The family has a choice on whether or not they choose to have a burial service before the child reaches the 20th gestational week. Before this time, it is not required by Jewish law. This was confirmed to me in multiple personal interviews. This can also be found in text “We do not mourn for fetuses (nefalim), and anything which does not live for 30 days, we do not mourn for it.”⁴⁶ During one of my interviews I asked why this was the common practice. I was told by an interviewee who had experienced this personally that “The third trimester is when people start to have mourning rituals because there is something noticeable there to mourn.”⁴⁷ Though burial during this stage is not required it can be done as a way for the parents to get closure.

The ceremonies that take place after the loss of a pregnancy are generally done privately. However the mourning couple can choose to invite close friends and family to support them during this time. Though it is not required to have a burial for someone at this stage in development, it has become a more common way to mourn. During an interview with a woman that works for a Jewish funeral home, I was told: “There is a special section in the cemetery for these burials. There are no ceremonies held and the graves are generally unmarked.”⁴⁸ During an interview I was told: “Most cemeteries have a section dedicated to the burial of infants and children.”⁴⁹ I questioned one of my interviewees on why the grave was left unmarked. I was told that it relates to the Jewish belief in reincarnation. “The grave is unmarked because it was not on earth long and it is believed that the soul will return.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ron Wolfson. [A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort: A guide to Jewish Bereavement](#). Vermont, Jewish Lights 2005

^BBrittany Michaels, personal interview October 26th 2015

⁴⁸ Diane Merton personal interview September 28th 2015

⁴⁹ Cardin 1999 pg. 175

⁵⁰ Marcus Cramer, personal interview November 6th 2015

When I learned about the burial ceremonies that are available, I assumed that these were performed privately because the family had not yet told anyone of the pregnancy. However, when conducting an interview, I learned that this is not the only reason. “Family and community are not invited to the service because only the parents had a connection to the child.”⁵¹ This is not something that occurred to me when previously discussing the topic of burial. The interviewee explained to me that because most people experience a miscarriage before they have told anyone that they were expecting, they would not choose to share their loss.

In addition to private ceremonies there has been a development of centers that assist women and families who have recently experienced a miscarriage. During this project, I researched three Jewish resource centers. These included: *The Red Stone* located in Washington D.C., *The National Center for Jewish Healing* in New York, NY and *The Jewish Board* found in New York, NY.

The Red Stone opened their doors in January of 2013. Their mission statement is “Creating Our Jewish Future, One Baby At A Time.”⁵² This institution was named for the Kabbalistic practice of a woman facing infertility issues to carry a red stone to promote a healthy pregnancy. When the woman has given birth to a healthy baby she returns the stone to the next woman in need. “The Talmud calls this Even Tukumah, a builder's stone. This stone will increase our fertility, protect us from miscarriage and bring us to our children safely. It will give us something tangible to hold in our hands, to see in our dreams. It is our hope.”⁵³

⁵¹ Marcus Cramer, personal interview November 6th 2015

⁵² *theredstone.org*. The Red Stone. Web. 9. Nov.2015

⁵³ *theredstone.org*. The Red Stone. Web. 9. Nov.2015

As we have already observed, in the Jewish community having children is very important. Dealing with infertility or miscarriage can be extremely hard for anyone, but especially for those in which family is a societal expectation. In order to assist those who are facing these issues *The Red Stone* provides a variety of services. One way in which they reach out to these families is to provide grants for fertility treatments and adoption services.⁵⁴

Another service that is offered is fertility support groups. These groups bring together women who are experiencing infertility and providing them with support and encouragement. “The groups will help women feel less isolated, build their knowledge of how to handle various situations and assist women in dealing with this life crisis of infertility.”⁵⁵

In order to provide these needed services, *The Red Stone* partners with community venues already in place. They work with synagogues, other Jewish organizations and already founded fertility groups. To help individuals they have a variety of ways to offer support including “Book clubs, mikvah programs, yoga for fertility, healing circles and future grandparent’s education.”⁵⁶ All of the services offered through this organization are at no cost to the participants. They raise funds to assist those who are in need.⁵⁷

The National Center for Jewish Healing opened their doors in 1994. They began services due to a “Response to a national upsurge of interest in reclaiming ancient Jewish spiritual wisdom and resources that foster wholeness, hope, comfort and connection in the face of illness and loss.”⁵⁸ They were formed by a group of Rabbis who had each experienced the loss of a

⁵⁴ *theredstone.org*, The Red Stone. Web. 9. Nov. 2015

⁵⁵ *theredstone.org*. The Red Stone. Web. 9. Nov.2015

⁵⁶ *theredstone.org*. The Red Stone. Web. 9. Nov.2015

⁵⁷ *theredstone.org*. The Red Stone Web.9. Nov. 2015

⁵⁸ *jewishhealing.org* The National Center for Jewish Healing. Web.9.Nov.2015⁵⁸

close family member and wanted there to be more support for them in the community. They offer a variety of services to help those who are dealing with a loss.

The first service is called Bikur Cholim which is a Jewish commandment to visit those who are sick. This organization offers volunteer training programs to show people how they can provide assistance to those needing extra support. They do this by “Participating in offering physical support (meals, transportation to appointments, caring for children, etc.) and spiritual care (hospital or home visits, healing services and prayer circles) to those in need.”⁵⁹ This is one of the many services can be utilized by someone who has recently experienced a pregnancy loss.

The center also offers spiritual support groups. These are run by a Rabbi, or a mental health professional. These groups give people the opportunity to talk with others who have gone through similar experiences and comfort each other. These groups can be held for many different types of grieving or emotionally draining situation. “Groups help Jews who are wrestling with infertility, are estranged from adult children or survivors of abusive relationships.”⁶⁰

Along the same lines of the support groups the center also provides Jewish spiritual counseling. In this model there is a combination of psychology and spirituality. The spiritual counselor works with the individual to create a “Spiritual Treatment Plan,” is designed which integrates personal spiritual practice with communal involvement, rituals and social action.”⁶¹ The counselor will connect the person to community resources, Rabbis and relevant prayers to guide them.

⁵⁹ *jewishhealing.org* The National Center for Jewish Healing. Web.9.Nov.2015

⁶⁰ *jewishhealing.org* The National Center for Jewish Healing. Web.9.Nov.2015

⁶¹ *jewishhealing.org* The National Center for Jewish Healing. Web.9.Nov.2015

A unique aspect to the center is that they also offer wellness programs. Not only do they focus on the mental health and supportive aspect of someone dealing with a loss, they also work to keep them engaged as an individual. “Meditation has been a part of the Jewish tradition for many centuries and music, visual arts and writing programs that explore Jewish symbols, sacred texts and wisdom are all creating opportunities for people to explore healing resources within their Jewish tradition and experience community”.⁶²

The Jewish Board opened its doors over 140 years ago in New York, NY. Their mission is “Helping New Yorkers realize “their potential and live as independently as possible. We promote resilience and recovery by addressing all aspects of an individual’s life including mental and physical health, family, housing, employment and education.”⁶³ Unlike the other organizations mentioned, the focus of *The Jewish Board* is not pregnancy or child loss but more the whole person.

This organization offers a wide variety of services and support groups ranging from domestic violence, alcoholism, assistance to single mothers, and programs focused on troubled youth. A similarity they share with *The Jewish Center for Healing* is that they offer training on Bikur Cholim, which is to assist those who are grieving or experiencing illness.

When looking at the calendar of events for this association you can see that each week there is a support group for Jewish parents who have lost a young child. In this group individuals “Draw strength, solace, and support from one another and from spiritual resources of the Jewish

⁶² jewishhealing.org The National Center for Jewish Healing. Web.9.Nov.2015

⁶³ jbfcs.org The Jewish Board. Web.9.Nov.2015

tradition.”⁶⁴ By this special support group being offered so regularly, it is clear to see that this is something that people in this community are struggling. This place gives a safe and supportive environment for those to discuss their loss and seek guidance.

Now that we have looked at centers that have been established to guide women through pregnancy loss, I would like to propose some steps measures that would assist Jewish women grieving the loss of an unborn child.

As we previously discussed the language we currently use implies that there was fault of the woman. With technological advancements, we can see that that miscarriage is not the fault of the mother. Instead of saying things like “I lost a baby”, I would encourage the women to say “I experienced a miscarriage”. This shows us that the loss occurred but does not have the same negative implications.

Another way that we need to alter our language in association with pregnancy loss is how we interact with the grieving mother and father. It is common practice to say to someone: “You can try again” or “This was not meant to be”. Having personally experienced this type of loss, I know firsthand how hurtful these words can be. Though people have every intention of comforting when saying these things it takes away from what the person is experiencing. By using this type of language, the feelings of the parent are not treated seriously. The woman going through this is usually dealing with depression, disappointment and uncertainty. The child that she lost is not replaceable. Instead of using language that implies that this child was not important or that this child was not supposed to be here, I would suggest listening to the woman’s feelings. Offer condolences and not instructions on how to grieve. I would encourage

⁶⁴ *jbfc.org* The Jewish Board. Web.9.Nov.2015

that people would instead say things like: “I am sorry for your loss” and offer emotional support during this time.

The next suggestion I would offer to assist Jewish families coping with this is to develop set ceremonies and rituals. There are many rituals and ceremonies that have been altered to fit this situation, but nothing that is set specifically for it. I believe that having set steps to take and traditions to follow would make the woman feel less isolated. In a culture that has many guidelines and set rituals in place it must be difficult to have to come up with a grieving process on your own. By providing a religious outline of how to handle the situation and how to grieve, I believe that the families affected would be more open to talking about what they are experiencing. I would suggest that the Jewish community comes together and discusses what rituals would bring closure to those who have experienced a miscarriage.

Something that not only Jewish women, but all women who have experienced this loss face, is the question concerning an appropriate time frame with which to grieve. I have heard time and time again that people should get over something that has occurred in their past. Though time makes dealing with pain easier it does not take it away completely. Anytime a woman who has had a miscarriage goes to a doctor appointment and is asked “How many times have you been pregnant?” they are going to have to answer with the number of pregnancies not the number of children they have. When people see children that are the age that the child they lost would have been they may wonder what their child would have been like if they had made it to this age. There are constant reminders of loss which cannot be avoided. I believe that if we allow women to express this pain whenever it comes that it would be easier for them to process.

Emotions are not something that can be sorted through by everyone in the same way. Each individual needs to have the opportunity to express and deal with their grief in their own time.

Support groups are my final suggestion for those who have experienced this loss. By getting together with a group of people who have gone through the same loss, it lets people know that they are not alone. Though there are support groups in existence, I feel that they should be more publicly advertised. People going through this should not have to question how to get help; it should be set out for them.

By taking away the secrecy of this loss, you take away the stigma associated with it. This is not something of which a woman should feel ashamed. Just as someone facing the loss of any other family member has the ability to speak about their pain, so should the person who never got to meet the child she mourns.

As previously noted: “Anywhere between 20 and 30 confirmed conceptions end in miscarriage.”⁶⁵ The loss of an unborn child can be difficult and painful to process. Women in the Jewish community face additional challenges when going through this because of the laws and customs in their faith and American culture. When I began this research, it was my assumption that the Jewish community did not have set mourning rituals for miscarriages because they did not see this as a loss. From the information that I gathered from individuals within the Jewish community as well as in my research I found that this was not the case. By having private ceremonies and grieving in creative ways they are able to do this away from the public eye. These customs which seemed to be making the loss insignificant show us that the

⁶⁵ Levy, Yamin. *“Confronting the loss of a baby: A personal and Jewish Perspective.”* Jersey City: NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1998 pg.35

focus is on maintaining the person who survived it. I believe that the customs created for how to handle miscarriage today are a step in the right direction but that more is required still. For this reason I believe there is more that can be done to support women of the Jewish community through their pregnancy loss. Though it has not been the focus of this paper, I would find it interesting to explore how the Jewish community's approach to pregnancy loss differs from that of other religions.