

## The Power of Sharing Our Vulnerabilities

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Delivered at Temple Emanu-El for Erev Rosh HaShanah 5784

Shana Tova!

Each year your rabbis sit down and meditate on the words we want to share during the High Holy Day season. Sometimes the sermon topics are timeless — meaning, we could give them any year and the impact of the topic could stand the test of time. Other sermons connect to a current event or moment in the world. Still others fall under another category: A once in a lifetime sermon. Tonight's sermon is one that I do not believe I could give any other time in my life.

I know this may come as a surprise to some of you, as this flattering high holy day robe hides it so well, but in case you thought things looked a little different, this Erev Rosh HaShanah I am blessed to be a little over 36 weeks pregnant.

We hear often that we timed it well, as I'll be 40 weeks just after Sukkot. My type-A self responds "we cut it a little close."

And the truth is, Max and I thought this was all starting in August. We thought we would be navigating coming back for the High Holy Days at just 8 weeks postpartum. However, that pregnancy didn't go as we had hoped and prayed. Instead, we suffered a pregnancy loss at around 7 weeks back in December. Then, in a quick turnaround of blessings, we became pregnant again in January, and here we are today.

I never thought I'd be a rabbi crafting a sermon around miscarriage. Not because I didn't think it could happen to us— we knew the statistics: 10–20% of known pregnancies end in miscarriage.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, I didn't realize the universal messages I would learn from the pain and suffering I, we, endured.

My hope is that the message I share this evening speaks to everyone: whether or not you relate personally. Basically: don't tune out just because you've heard the topic headline. Though the personal touch of this sermon focuses on one kind of loss, we've all had different types of losses in our lives. Tonight, I hope we leave as a more connected community, a braver community, and a community ready to continue lifting up individuals in their times of need.

I want to share the full story of what we experienced because it paints a very real picture of the types of isolation we may find ourselves in, even when we are surrounded by people: colleagues at work, family, friends, and strangers. I'll tell you the ending now, which is that if I had to go through it all again, I would do it differently. Having done the studying and the reflection, I now feel more equipped with the tools and words I was missing at the time. It's as if I have some things I would like to share with a younger version of myself — things that would have really helped her...and maybe will be helpful to you.

You see, I happened to miscarry while being the rabbi on the trip for 19 young Jewish and interfaith couples, the Honeymoon Israel trip. Which, sidebar, was an absolutely amazing trip when I remove the last part of the story. For those less familiar, Honeymoon Israel provides immersive trips to Israel for locally based cohorts of couples with at least one Jewish partner, and they bring along a local rabbi or Jewish professional to help facilitate the trip.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.marchofdimes.org/find-support/topics/miscarriage-loss-grief/miscarriage#:~:text=For women who know they,12th week of pregnancy.>

At this point, we were on our final 36 hours of running around Tel Aviv before our flight home. Being on the trip in my 7th week of pregnancy, I hadn't shared the news with anyone except my co-staff member. In many circles, it has become customary to stay mostly quiet until 14 weeks. This waiting period is rooted in the statistics I cited earlier, that 10–20% of known pregnancies end in miscarriage. But we'll unpack more of that waiting period in a bit.

As the events unfolded over the next 36 hours, I knew medically what was taking place. The fetus was not genetically viable, and as much as we wanted that pregnancy to hold, there were other genetic forces at play.

I also knew spiritually and emotionally what was happening. Max and I were about to suffer a real loss. We lost what we'd dreamed for the past 7 weeks. The loss of expectations for August. The loss of a sense of certainty for where our life was going in the coming months.

I began to compartmentalize: I was in Israel doing a job. My job was to make sure these couples felt connected to each other, to others in the group, and to Israel. To make sure that they were having a positive Jewish experience so that they could come back to Atlanta and continue to build their community. In my mind, I needed to make it another 48 hours, and I could then take care of myself.

The problem with compartmentalizing is that you never really know how well you do it. I doubt I was as fully present as I could have been in those last 36 hours — how could I have been? I kept my suffering to myself in the privacy of my room and put on a brave face in public, all the while experiencing a private loss that no one could visibly see.

This may be your first lightbulb moment in my story. How often have you, do you, will you suffer in private and put on a brave face in the public sphere, all while suffering a loss that no one can visibly see?

At the time, I did what I thought I needed to do in the moment. AND I wouldn't make the same choice again.

Health is such a personal matter: sometimes very private, other times very public, most often somewhere in between. We brought the world and our village with us when we went through Zohara's medical journey. For those less familiar, at 3 weeks old, she was diagnosed with a very rare congenital heart defect, and at 7 months old, we went to Boston, where one of two surgeons in the world was equipped to perform her open heart surgery. We're pleased to report she continues to thrive. We were new parents of a medically complex kid, and we could not have managed it all without the support of our extended family and Temple Emanu-El village.

Something about the journey of a miscarriage felt so different from earlier medical struggles in our family. At this stage in the pregnancy, there was no visible external change. My belly hadn't grown yet; almost no one knew there was anything to monitor. It wasn't like having a child who couldn't grow or gain weight, something quite noticeable in our early updates about Zohara's medical journey. This loss felt invisible because, in many ways, it was invisible. But I later realized something else was at play, something related to Judaism. Part of why things felt so different was because of how I *thought* Judaism viewed early pregnancy.

In Judaism, we have so many superstitions and customs surrounding fetuses, all having to do with warding away the evil eye or what our grandparents perhaps called keeping away the *ayin hara*.

Traditionally, a greeting for someone announcing a pregnancy is "B'sha'ah Tova," meaning "In good time" or implying "may it all go well at the right time" rather than "mazel tov," congratulations. This is done as a recognition that the congrats should wait until the fetus is born...because until then, we need to keep the evil eye away.

In some Jewish circles, families won't host baby showers or purchase *any* baby products prior to birth. Some Jewish families don't share the name they intend to give the baby until after the birth or even the *bris* or naming ceremony. Even with vast medical improvements, these traditions that date back to much higher infant mortality rates of the days of the shtetls, have continued to be on the minds of Jewish parents today.

I mean, we really do A LOT to say this life isn't real until it is born. Which, in Jewish law, is very true. However, the warding away of the evil eye and the superstitions built up around the idea that each pregnancy is fragile, leaves a gap in how parents navigate the FORTY WEEKS of in-between time.

As I mentioned earlier, in mainstream society, it has become common practice not to share a pregnancy until crossing that 12–14 week mark when the chance of miscarriage takes a major statistical drop. Most online blogs these days encourage everyone to work on their own timeline for when they feel comfortable sharing, and everyone *should* do what's right for them.

I just wanted to take the time to mention, from the bimah, that 14 weeks is a LONG TIME.

In many ways, this time is terribly isolating. The first trimester is a time when the birthing parent may feel horrifically sick, all while balancing work, perhaps another child, and trying not to puke on their coworker — all while also not telling more than perhaps their innermost circle that they are in the early stages of pregnancy.

While Judaism does not consider the fetus a life until birth, our tradition *does*, in fact, recognize the stress that pregnancy puts on parents.

Even in the days of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, the community acknowledged that women who became pregnant changed their state of purity. While the language of the rabbis, in talking about bringing sacrifices to move from impure to pure, doesn't necessarily speak to our modern sensibilities, the reasoning behind their logic should. The WHOLE POINT of the system was to bring those who suffer back to the community. This is a really big deal. We need not study many texts to understand that the Rabbinical system wasn't exactly focused on the needs of women. However, these teachings really make an impact on me because they hold intergenerational knowledge and wisdom that shouldn't be overlooked.

In Mishna Keritot, a text from around 200 CE, the rabbis discussed at length the various rituals, sacrifices, and circumstances surrounding a woman's purification after pregnancy loss. Rabbi Nicole Auerbach, the URJ's Associate Director of Community Building and Leadership, understood the rabbis' struggles as follows: "[The rabbis] acknowledge what we too often seek to ignore – that not all pregnancies end with a child. They insist that even when a pregnancy dissolves into something that resembles only the primordial beginnings of life, we cannot pretend that nothing happened. We must instead ritually recognize that the woman took part, albeit too briefly, in the act of creation."

In Temple times, those who were impure were instructed to share their impure status, not only to avoid making others impure, but as a grand notification saying: Something bad has happened to me. I feel outside of the "camp" right now, and I need your compassion and prayers to help bring me back. This act acknowledged the loss of a potential life, a potential dream, of a potential child, and the state of aloneness that the grieving mother-to-be was in.

When we maintain a culture of keeping pregnancy and pregnancy loss private for so long, we remove the Jewish space that can provide a public transition into mourning. Rabbi Auerbach noted: If you ask many women why they wait to tell people they are pregnant, they will tell you they want to avoid having to “untell” everyone if something goes wrong. She went on to teach me, “As someone who had to do this, I assure you, the untelling is not the hard part. In fact, it can be a surprising source of comfort. [And, you can also designate someone else to do the untelling for you as a way to lighten the burden.]”<sup>2</sup>

At this point, I’m assuming you have heard something in these system and stories that parallel an aspect of loss in your life. Feeling isolated due to an illness, tragic event, or life struggle goes much deeper than the example of pregnancy loss. I believe, wholeheartedly, that we often find God in the telling and un-telling of our realities. God is in the compassion that surrounds us when we share our vulnerabilities with other people, with our community.

With societal pressures, fear of job loss, fear of taboo or being made an outcast, and fear of judgment...people may be weary of sharing the pain they are going through.

Sometimes, the struggle is a personal one, and other times, it is tangential, supporting family who are going through something heavy— illness, mental health, addiction, divorce, suicide, or the loss of a loved one.

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<sup>2</sup> [Mishna Keritot 1:3](#). For an excellent translation and analysis of *Keritot*, see Federico Dal Bo, *Massekhet Keritot: A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck 2013). Mishna Keritot 1:5.

A word of warning though. When these struggles become our entire identity or define the entirety of our relationship with another person, we end up crossing a boundary. There is a difference between sharing the burden of a struggle and overloading someone else with our woes. If someone crosses that boundary, they should be guided to explore therapy or other sources of help. A key component to the messiness of our struggles is finding the right balance of surrounding ourselves with support systems from family and friends without overburdening them. Some struggles will require professional help to process. Other struggles can be supported through a network of friends, and still others will require a mix of the two. We must strike a balance that prevents the additional burden of loneliness.

The reality of our world is that we are simultaneously surrounded by people in the midst of their struggle, those who have overcome the unimaginable, and those who have survived one struggle only to find themselves in the depths of another.

Sitting in the liminal space of being surrounded by community while feeling completely alone is not a new phenomenon. So much so, that tradition has provided us with what is a beautiful template for moving through this kind of despair; I only wish I had studied it sooner.

There is a particular piece of Torah that highlights the humble and great leader Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher. The story comes from the Torah portion Behaalotecha in the Book of Numbers. In this particular part of the story, Moses reaches his lowest of emotional lows. The Israelites come to him once again with a complaint: This time, complaining about the food, saying they rather return to slavery in Egypt because at least the food was good. This latest complaint, having built upon the sin of the golden calf, complaining about water and so many other things... was Moses' final straw.



He had a complete emotional breakdown, so much so that he wanted God to take him out of all the misery. While Moses did not suffer a personal loss or illness in the moment, he was in an extreme state of despair, completely surrounded by *his* community while feeling entirely alone.

When Moses was in another state of despair, a full two books of Torah ago, in the Book of Exodus, his father-in-law, Yitro, had recommended that Moses create for himself a court of 70 elders to help share the burden of leading the people. This infrastructure was already in place. And yet, while he had systems in place Moses hadn't tapped into them. He felt this way because he hadn't yet spoken to anyone about his problem! So Moses started by reaching out to one person, or in this case, to one listener, to God. God's response is our lesson: Moses needed to surround himself with others, he needed community, he needed support, and he needed people. But more than that, he needed an extra element of support, a spirit of sorts. God said, "I will come down and speak with you [and the elders], and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it upon them; they shall share the burden of the people with you, and you shall not bear it alone." God taught Moses that in the midst of despair, he must not be alone — not physically, not spiritually, he had to speak up.

Still, to this day, Judaism has prioritized being there for people in vulnerable times. We are commanded to visit the sick, comfort the mourner, be there for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. In ancient times, it was easier to recognize those in need. The systems in place required those in despair to come forward to the Temple to make their problem known publicly. Today, we have more abilities to connect than ever, yet some will say they have never felt more alone. Myself included, we often don't know how to begin to share the misfortunes we face. But what I've learned from my latest hardship is that, at least for me, it's easier to move out of despair when we let others in to help.

Our task is not easy. In the 21st century, I'm asking us to be vulnerable — and to not be alone in our vulnerabilities!

My truth is that if I went back in time to that terrible personal struggle of miscarrying while on a group trip, knowing what I know today, I would, in fact, do things differently. I would have found the right words or the right way to speak my truth and remain my authentic self while leading. But since there is no time machine for redos, I offer my story as one example that I hope will speak to others. I wish I could wave a magic yad and guarantee that none in this space would ever face hardship from this day forward, but the realities of life teach us that this won't be the case.

I pray that in 5784, we feel empowered to seek out support should we be like Moses in the depths of despair. Moses, the great leader, Moses, the prophet, at times felt a profound sense of despair due to his self-imposed isolation.

I pray that we heed God's advice to not go through despair in isolation. I know the power of finding God in the compassion surrounding us when we share our vulnerabilities. I now know how deep the despair can be when the pressures of society and the taboos of sharing lead us to trudge through certain losses alone.

Temple Emanu-El has systems in place to help our congregants through difficult times, whether more privately or publicly. Our Mi Shebeirach list for healing is there to publicly name those who are struggling with health issues, not just as a call of prayer to the heavens but as a reminder to our community to keep them at the forefront of our minds. Come to Friday night services to be a part of this powerful moment each week.

Our Caring Committee exists because we know that just taking one meal off of someone's to-do list or hearing from one person, even a stranger, whose sole reason for reaching out is to express their care — we know this makes a difference.

And your rabbis will make time in their schedules to help our members talk through the spiritual side of life's hardships.

I pray that we leave tonight, entering the year 5784 as a more connected community, a braver community, and a community ready to lift one another up in our times of need.

While it may be Erev Rosh HaShanah, it is also Friday night, and so I'd ask that we all rise [motion to rise] like we do each Friday that our community gathers. Hold the names of those that you know are in need of healing, and whisper them to yourself. Add your name to your list if you are in need of healing. Let us rise, wrap an arm around your neighbor, and together we pray these words of Mi Shebeirach, page 245.

[Sing Mi Shebeirach].