A Ceremony of Remembering, Mourning, and Healing After Miscarriage

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SOME NINE YEARS AGO, I SUFFERED TWO MISCARRIAGES WITHIN A SIX-MONTH PERIOD. ALTHOUGH THERE IS NO JEWISH RITUAL FOR MARKING MISCARRIAGE, MY HUSBAND AND I ENACTED A ceremony of remembering, mourning, and healing. I composed this ceremony, drawing on various Jewish rituals, texts, and symbols, to fashion what turned out to be both a mourning and fertility rite. The ceremony sat quietly for a few years, while my life moved on: we are now blessed with two young daughters. They as well as my work have kept me more than sufficiently busy. But over the years I have shared the text of the ceremony with others, and begun to reflect further on the entire experience.

More recently, I have begun to see it as an example of how women can find meaning and voice through a creative approach to their religious traditions, even when those traditions seem silent on women's experience. When confronting that silence, as we know, some women rail against the tradition; some strive to change language that seems to exclude women; and some abandon their traditions altogether as irremediably patriarchal. I hope to demonstrate another way in Judaism: midrash—interpretation—in a broad sense, developed by women and centered on women.

In the summer of 1986, I was 34 years old, married eight years without children, and my first two pregnancies ended at eleven and seven weeks. Both my husband and I were saddened by these losses, but my despair was overwhelming and the sense of death afflicted me uniquely. For my journey to the new role of parent had already started emotionally, as well as physically. I experienced these abrupt endings as the snuffing out of the tiny beginnings of new life, and the snuffing out of my emerging identity as mother. Swirling fears threatened to engulf me: Were these beginnings of no value? Would I ever complete the journey of a successful pregnancy? Would I muster the courage to embark on the journey again?

It was irrelevant to me that Jewish law required no mourning for losses of early pregnancy. These miscarriages, literally matters of life and death, were too important for me to simply "put behind me." These events of my personal calendar needed marking on some larger, more significant calendar.

My pregnancies had not been public facts. But when miscarriages struck, privacy no longer worked. I spoke endlessly: to my husband, to family, to women friends, to a therapist. Yet there was a limit to that. What ordinary mortal could possibly listen to all the pain and grief I needed to cry out? I felt the need for a different kind of listener, for what has been referred to as a "deep receptivity."[1]

This came as a surprise to me. I knew well the depictions of God in Jewish tradition, but I had seldom before considered myself to be communicating directly with that God. I didn't know what I was seeking when I said to my husband, "I need to mark the miscarriages with some kind of ceremony, I don't know how or what, but will you join me?" His "yes" was immediate, though neither of us knew what form our "ritualizing" would take. I thought I was only trying to find a new outlet to express my despair. Not until later—during and after the ceremony—did I realize that the very decision to do it meant that I was ready to summon my energies to regenerate hope.

To plan the ceremony, I sought advice from two close friends. They suggested incorporating the Kiddush Levanah, the monthly blessing of the New Moon, usually enacted outdoors at Sabbath's end. It was unfamiliar to us, but its evocation of waxing moon, renewed cycles, and womb made it seem appropriate as our basic building block. Our ceremony started with the rituals of Havdalah (bidding farewell to the Sabbath) and Kiddush Levanah, and ended with Jewish mourning rituals and symbolic actions. In the middle we recited a lengthy service of prayer and reflections.

To put together the service, I read through a variety of classical Jewish sources—Bible, midrash, liturgy. As I read, I began to weave strands of those texts together—a verse from here, a passage from there, all woven into a tapestry of text, most in Hebrew, some in English, some given new meaning by the unfamiliar context. I was surprised to find so much relevant material and even more surprised to discover that I could allow it to speak for me, that *I* could speak through *it*. Only very sparingly did I use my own words or other contemporary material. I spent an extremely intense week of reading and composing, combing through, combining and recombining texts, indeed, a week of *talmud torah* (Torah study).

Let me explain more fully what my husband and I actually did that late summer night. With stars shining in the sky, the two of us stood outside in our back yard, transformed for us into a private sacred space, a temporary domestic shrine. We began by bidding farewell to the Sabbath. Havdalah (literally, "separation" or "differentiation") normally returns Jews from the Sabbath's sacred time to mundane weekday time. But the invocation we uttered next ushered us into a personal moment of sacred time. We recited together:

> On this *motza'ei shabbat* (ending of the Sabbath) of the weekly portion *Ki Taytzay*, as the ninth day of the month Elul passes, and the tenth day of the month Elul begins, in the year 5746—as 5746 draws towards its close and the New Year approaches—we, Leah Hayyah bat Aharon u-Vatsheva and Binyamin Meir ben ha-Rav Gershon Ze'ev u-Feninah, come together to bless the waxing moon of Elul, the month of love, and to celebrate with the moon and the Shekhinah;
> to mourn our losses which occurred nine months ago and three months ago;
> to pray, to study, to reflect;
> to gain strength and hope;
> to prepare ourselves to make a new beginning.

Identifying ourselves as ritual actors by our Hebrew names, we

marked the moment on the Jewish sacred calendar by day, weekly Torah reading, month, season, and year. Yet our uncertainty and hesitation were palpable. We felt "betwixt and between"—betwixt pregnancy and miscarriage, between infertility and parenthood. I was uncertain about my very identity: Who was I? Barren woman or fertile mother? I see now that in our self-designed rite of passage, we were praying that we would not stay mired in the "liminal" or in-between phase,[2] rather that the ceremony would help us risk the passage again and indeed cross the threshold to new life.

In the words of Jewish prayers, we next asked God to "listen to our voice" and to "make our words fitting" *(sh'ma koleinu...netzor leshoni mei-ra)*. We were self-conscious, perhaps even frightened.[3] The traditional words lent weight to our task and boosted our courage to mount this personal drama without embarrassment. We ended the preliminaries with passages from Ecclesiastes: *That which is crooked cannot be made straight...* (1:15) and *To everything there is a season...* (3:1-8). At that point, however, our acceptance was only a pious hope, it was not yet heart-felt.

We continued with the Kiddush Levanah, reciting it from the prayerbook in Hebrew, and repeating some key phrases also in English. Its core reads:

> Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who with His utterance created the heavens ... A law and a schedule did He give them so that they not deviate from their assigned task. They are joyous and happy to do the will of their Creator, the worker of truth whose work is truth. To the moon He said that she should renew herself as a crown of splendor for those borne from the womb, for they are destined to renew themselves like her ... Blessed are You, Lord, who renews the months.
>
> and
>
> May it be Your will O Lord, my God and God of my fathers [and mothers]—to replenish the deficiency of the moon so that it may be imperfect no more.

It was the linking of the regular renewal of the moon with the renewal of human beings, those graphically described as "borne from the womb" (Isa. 46:3), that spoke so powerfully to me. The prayer's linkage of personal, natural, collective, and cosmic matched our desperate desire "to be

in touch with inescapable rhythms,"[4] to have our individual fates conjoined with "symbols of cosmic processes of life and death."[5] How could we dare to think so loftily of our ritual activity? Perhaps because Kiddush Levanah explicitly equates itself with welcoming the presence of the Shekhinah, i.e., the in-dwelling part of God, considered by mystics as the feminine aspect of God. As is customary, we ended Kiddush Levanah with the Mourner's Kaddish, the prayer that proclaims God's Name great over the world He has created according to His will.

We went inside for further readings and reflection. I had prepared numerous texts in sections: mystery; narratives of pregnancy, loss, and pain; reflections and consolations of divine and human love; and prayer.

We read some prayers and biblical verses that speak directly of fertility and stillbirths, hope and joy, mourning and despair, loneliness, human ignorance and divine knowledge. For example, we recited the verse from Ecclesiastes (11:5):

> *Just as we do not know how the lifebreath passes into the limbs within the womb of her that is with child, so we cannot foresee the actions of God, who causes all things to happen.*

And from Job 3:11 and 3:16:

> *Why did I not die from the womb?*
> *Or why was I not like a hidden untimely birth*
> *Like babies who never saw the light?*

In other cases, we transposed words of classical texts into the unfamiliar context of our particular situation. This was hardly a deliberate strategy on my part: rather, when going through texts, I simply could not help but read them in terms of my pressing concerns. I will give examples from the three key moments of narrative, consolation, and prayer.

We told our story of pregnancy, loss, and pain in biblical words. We understood the commandments to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:27-28; 9:1) to apply to women as well as men. To evoke the early stage of pregnancy, we used Isaiah's words (53:2) about the Lord's servant:

> *For he grew up...as a tender plant...he had no form or beauty, no countenance that we should find him pleasing.*

I suspect that only a woman commentator would think of these lines in terms of a fetus or embryo. To tell of the miscarriages, we again used Isaiah's words (40:24):

Scarcely are they planted; scarcely are they sown;
Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth.
He merely blows upon them and they wither;
and the storm wind takes them away as stubble.

Trying to describe the emotional and psychological reality of losing my pregnancies, I put together verses from Genesis, Song of Songs, and Job, in which the image of water took on for me the idea of amniotic fluid or the potential for new life.

We had a *well of living waters,* but now it is no more.
[Gen. 26:19, Song of Songs 4:15]
We found water [Gen. 26:32]
The waters fail from the sea. [Job 14:11]
The pit was empty, there was no water in it. [Gen. 37:14]

Our narrative section also told of our difficulties as a couple in the aftermath of the miscarriages, of the mutual estrangement that our differing experiences and responses engendered, of the deep sense of isolation I in particular felt. In rites of passage, participants are often placed in isolation; but I was already there. We expressed that symbolically with verses from the Song of Songs, and from a modern Hebrew poem by Yehudah Amichai:

Ein lanu malakh go'el
Sh'nenu be-yachad ve-khol echad lechud
We have no redeeming angel
The two of us together, each of us alone.

Formal ritual expression of our story helped us face our alienation, and later in the ceremony, begin to overcome it. I now see the entire narrative functioning as a cathartic form of story-telling for the "cosmic record," a reenactment through midrash, functioning similarly to the Passover Seder.[6]

Consolation and hope of redemption began to come through identification with larger rhythms—not only the natural cycles of the moon, but also the collective Jewish people, and specifically the barren matriarchs and Zion. It was especially powerful to find such connections made explicit in Jewish texts, as in the midrash Pesikta Rabbati[7], which links Kiddush Levanah with the blessing of fertility:

> We may recite the blessing for the new moon's advent up to the fourteenth day in the month while the moon's crescent has not yet rounded to the full, while the moon is still waxing. The Holy One, blessed be He, says: 'Take care to recite to Me the proper blessing for every occasion. If you are careful with regard to such blessings, I will come to you and bless you in return... Consider Abram and Sarai who were not destined to beget and bear children. They hearkened to Me...' And Abram became Abraham. And Sarai became Sarah. And God remembered Sarah.

To remember means to remember with a child. We hoped that our Kiddush Levanah would prove as efficacious as the hearkening of Abram and Sarai.

In Pesikta Rabbati 43:5, all barren women are remembered with the matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, and Hannah:

> *The refining pot is for silver, and the furnace for gold; and a person is tried according to his praise.* (Prov. 27:21). The Holy One, blessed be He, refines the righteous, each one of them, according to his strength... according to what his or her praiseworthy deeds have proved him or her to be.
>
> For twenty-five years, the Holy One, blessed be He, tried Sarah. He tried Sarah according to her strength.
>
> For twenty years, the Holy One, blessed be He, tried Rebekah. He tried Rebekah according to her strength.
>
> And for nineteen years, the Holy One, blessed be He, tried Hannah. He tried Hannah according to her strength.
>
> He tried each one, and remembered her...
>
> All barren women everywhere in the world were remembered together with Sarah and were with child at the same time she was, and when she gave birth to a child, all of them gave birth to children at the same time she did. (Pes. R. 42:4)

Reciting these passages afforded me identification with female ancestors and a historical community of fellow sufferers. I was given license to pray like my foremothers—and with their merit—for strength and for fertility. Thus, we continued in our own words:

For every woman who has suffered difficulty in conceiving or bearing, so the successful bearing and birth of a child is as miraculous as the birth of a baby to the ninety-year-old Sarah. So is every healthy pregnancy and birth a miracle.

May all children of God who wish to be parents laugh and reap in joy with Abraham and Sarah. (based on Pes. R. 42:7)

HOPE ALSO CAME FROM IDENTIFYING WITH ZION AND JERUSALEM. I paraphrased Lamentations 1:1: *Alas! How does she sit lonely, she, once great with people, once full of life....* But national destruction and sorrow are assuaged by the messianic promise of deliverance. The Talmud states (Yerushalmi Berakhot): "On the day the Temple was destroyed, the redeemer was born." We noted the coinciding of death and birth also in natural, and indeed menstrual terms—in my words: "every monthly flow is both end and beginning, a dying, and an awakening anew for the possibility of life." To my amazement, I found the link between the Messiah and infertility expressed in Pesikta Rabbati 36:1, which relates the following story:

At the time of the Messiah's creation, the Holy One, blessed be He, will tell him in detail what will befall him:
There are souls that have been put away with thee under My throne,
and it is their sins which will bend thee down under a yoke of iron...
Art thou willing to endure such things?
The Messiah will ask the Holy One, blessed be He:
Will my suffering last many years?
The Holy One, blessed be He, will reply:
Upon thy life and the life of My head,
it is a period of seven years which I have decreed for thee.
But if thy soul is sad at the prospect of thy suffering,
I shall at this moment banish these sinful souls.
The Messiah will say:
Master of the universe, with joy in my soul and gladness in my heart
I take this suffering upon myself, provided that not one
from amongst Israel perish;
that not only the living be saved in my days,
but also the dead, who have died since the days of the first human...
And that not only all of these be saved in my days,
but also the stillborn and miscarried ones,
And that not only all of these be saved in my days,
but all those whom Thou had thought to create but
were not yet created.
Such are the things I desire, and for these I am ready to take upon myself whatever Thou decreest.

Only after telling our story and affirming such connections could we beseech God—as the "Fount of Living Waters"—to fulfill us through biblical promises of compassion, sustenance, and fertility. Harking back to the ritual blessing of the New Moon, we prayed in our own words:

As the heavens are established forever, and the cycles of moons and of months are ever renewed, so too may our cycles of hope, of fruitfulness, and of love. May we, like them, be true and faithful workers.

HAVING AFFIRMED OUR TRUST IN DIVINE LOVE, WE COULD NOW REAFFIRM our faith in the cycles of our own human love. Symbolically, we could begin to overcome our mutual estrangement by reciting verses of love from the Song of Songs and repeating words from our *ketubah* (marriage document) that we had uttered years before on another significant ritual occasion, our wedding ceremony. We derived sustenance from the fact that Elul, the time of our mourning ceremony, is known as the month of love.[8]

And in the most emotional moment in the ceremony, we recited my adaptation (drawing on Samuel, Job, and Isaiah) of the classic mourner's prayer, *El Maleh Rachamim:*

God filled with compassion, dwelling on high
Grant perfect rest under the wings of the Shekhinah, among the holy and pure ones who shine brilliantly as the heavens,
To the souls of the little ones,
our little ones,
the tiniest of beginnings—

a slight and small beginning,
a tiny and tender root—
lacking form and beauty and countenance
but still, desired and loved.
The little ones who died, in hidden and untimely births, on the second of Tevet and the 27th of Iyyar in the year 5746, the beloved and dear parted ones... in their lives and in their deaths they were not parted.

We marked the transition to the last part of our ceremony with words from Genesis [43:30-31].

And Joseph's feelings were stirred on account of his brothers, and he wanted to cry. He went into a [private] room and wept there. He washed his face and came out. He restrained himself. Then he said, Serve the bread.

With Joseph's example of self-control and strength before us, we returned to the world of action. We performed certain traditional Jewish mourning rituals: we read parts of the "acceptance of divine judgment" *(tsidduk ha-din)* from the traditional funeral service—but only parts, in acknowledgment that we were mourning the unborn, and not persons who had actually lived and died. We washed our hands—and, like Joseph, our faces. We ate and drank substances seen as symbols of life: eggs, water, and like Joseph, bread. We studied a chapter of Mishnah, and pledged a gift to charity. We then looked towards a sweet and happy New Year by eating its symbolic foods of honey and challah. We closed with words of prayer and blessing, using the familiar Psalm 126 to link once again the natural and the divine:

Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like watercourses in the Negev. Though they go along weeping, carrying the seed-bag, they shall come back with songs of joy, carrying their sheaves.

NOW, UPON REFLECTION, I ASK MYSELF: HOW DID THIS MOURNING ceremony became efficacious as a healing ceremony? Even in its immediate aftermath, I saw that the ceremony had renewed my own sense of self. The preparation was itself part of the healing, bringing mind, heart, and soul into working unity, and restoring my intellectual and spiritual creativity to myself.

It hardly needs saying that process alone was not enough. I found deep sustenance in the content of the sources which I read and re-worked. Had the raw material not been good, all my efforts at creativity might have been in vain.

The ceremony allowed me to voice my private grief in a somewhat public fashion. The symbolic drama of ritual action allowed us to address painful realities and potentially overpowering emotion with "improbable, impossible claims," with "assertions that in other contexts would be unconvincing."[9] Outside of the ritual context, we might not have been able to assert or believe in promises of divine love and fertility. Through ritual, we could express, simultaneously, fear and hope and trust. Ritual offered us an alternative to the repression of overpowering emotion[10] and indeed to depression as well.

With its combination of mourning and Kiddush Levanah, and experienced the ceremony functioned as a rite of passage. We expressed the ambiguities of liminality and experienced "reincorporation,"considered by scholars as the last stage of a rite of passage, finding connections between the personal and the broader collective, natural and cosmic realms, and eating symbolic foods.[11]

For us, reincorporation also meant that we found community. Whom did I rejoin or discover in community? My husband; my important female ancestors—the barren-then-blessed Jewish matriarchs; all infertile women everywhere; and Jews collectively. My use of Hebrew and Jewish texts reinforced the sense of community and continuity with the people who have taken these texts seriously, and with the One they address.

Recent students of ritual point out that most rituals, but especially "nascent" or self-designed ones, combine convention with creativity,[12] or fixed parts from traditional rituals with variable or open parts devised for the particular occasion.[13] The combination can be powerful, inviting authentic searching and self-expression, yet anchoring them in the security and resonance of tradition. It is striking that in our ceremony, even the "open" parts came from the "fixed" tradition: perhaps paradoxically, I voiced my pain as a woman not in my own words, but through those of traditional Jewish texts and the traditional activities of interpretation and story-telling.

I didn't really plan it that way, but given who I am, text and Hebrew emerged as vital components of my ceremony. More than my own words could have, they helped connect me to realms beyond myself. Through

rereading, reinterpreting, and recombining, I found it possible to use traditional texts both to explore and articulate women's experience. I believe that with creative effort, women can make Jewish texts talk to and of women. Why not read "waters" as amniotic fluid sometimes? As women read with imagination—and interpretative daring—we can find ourselves in classical texts. Jewish women can, I believe, weave a new garment from the sturdy material of Jewish tradition.

Note: Biblical translations are from Jewish Publication Society translations, the Jerusalem Koren, or are my own.

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Notes

1. See Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Lanham, New York and London: University Press of America, 1982), pp. 43-45, 63-64. By deep receptivity Grime means "that some aspect of the cosmos appear to be responsive"—an assumption essential to ritual enactment.

2. On liminality in rites of passage, see Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, tr. Monika B. Vizedon and Gabrielle L. Caffe (London: Routledge and Paul, 1960), and Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage," in *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), also reprinted in Louise Carus Mahdi, Steven Foster, and Meredith Little, eds., *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation* (La Salle, Il.: Open Court, 1987).

3. On the fear experienced by composers of new rituals, see Barbara Myerhoff, "Rites of Passage: Process and Paradox," in *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual*, ed. Victor Turner (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), p. 131; and Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Lives and Our Communities* (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1991), p. 37.

4. Grimes links ritual to the participants' desire to connect with transcendent, cosmic rhythms (op. cit., pp. 59-60).

5. On ritual as the conjunction of individual fate and cosmic processes, see Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures, 1966, The University of Rochester (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), p. 43. See also Gennep, op. cit., pp. 180-182, on full moon rites.

6. For other examples of cathartic story-telling, see Penina V. Adelman, *Miriam's Well: Rituals for Jewish Women Around the Year* (New York: Biblio Press, 1990), pp. 90-95 specifically for pregnancy loss and infertility; and Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), pp. 33-39.

7. Chapters 42, "The Lord's remembering of Sarah," and 43, "The Lord's remembering of Hannah" contain much rich material. I have used *Pesikta Rabbati: Discourses for Feasts, Fasts, and Special Sabbaths*, vol. 2, tr. William G. Braude (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), with occasional paraphase or summary of my own.

8. The word Elul in Hebrew forms an acronym for verse 6:3 from Song of Songs: *ani le-dodi ve-dodi li, I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.*

9. Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, op. cit., pp. 86, 93, highlights this aspect of ritual.

10. E.C. Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1982), pp. 235-236, cited in Virginia Hine, "Self-created Ceremonies of Passage," in Mahdi, Foster and Little eds., op. cit., p. 304, discussed ritual as an alternative to repression.

11. Gennep, op. cit.

12. See Grimes, op. cit., p. 57; also Ronald L. Grimes, "Defining Nascent Ritual," *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 1982, 50: 539-555, p. 543.

13. See Barbara Myerhoff, "We Don't Wrap Herring in a Printed Page: Fusions, Fictions and Continuity in Secular Ritual," in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Assen/Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977).