

Tears and Prayers...

Vayeitzei 5782/2021

A generation ago, talking about fertility issues, miscarriage, still birth and loss of children, was seen as taboo. These were private matters. There were whispers of course, murmurs between shabbat meals, or in supermarkets and communal gatherings, but you couldn't have a full-blown conversation about it, and the idea of communal organisations devoted to the issues was beyond comprehension.

It seems strange that there was such a disconnect between the realities of women and men in times of deep struggle and our ability to talk about it, especially when fertility conversations are found in our texts; the matriarchs and Channah of course as chief protagonists in the story, but the midrash, Talmud, and other texts also deals with the conversation widely. However, the conversations are imperative because the psychological impact of not talking about things, and leaving people feeling isolated in their misery or grief.

Take Rachel. When we think of our patriarchs we think of empathy, care, emotion, and yet, when push came to shove for Rachel, she received none of that.

Rachel was struggling – she watched as her sister Leah had children, and she gets to breaking point. “give me children or I shall die” she says. Jacob, the man who had been raised and loved by his own mother, who had been protected, who had dwelled in tents soaking up the moral and ethical teachers of Shem and Ever, responds to her not from a place of empathy and comfort, but one of anger and frustration¹.

The Ramban shares the conversation between Rachel and Jacob, with the former asking whether her husband could intercede on her behalf like his father and grandfather had done for their wives. Jacob seems to think that because he had moved out of the Land of Israel he didn't have the same depth of connection with God, but the Ramban reminds us that others in the Bible had prayed for others with less of a connection with both God and the subject of their prayers.

The Ramban then offers scathing rebuke, now drawing us to a conversation between God and Jacob, whereby God tells Jacob - Is this the way to answer a woman who is oppressed by her barrenness?³.

If one would read God's statement without knowing it was from the Ramban, it wouldn't seem inappropriate to think that it was penned by a modern feminist thinker creating a new midrash. But in reality it is the approach that is definitely needed, because the approach of Jacob has for too long been the approach of most of humanity, likely pushing those struggling deeper and deeper into isolation.

Yesh Tikva, an infertility awareness and support organisation provides an annual journal and training that while dealing with infertility awareness etc, also focusses deeply on how to be compassionate to those who are wanting to share their stories and struggles. As Brene Brown states “Empathy is a way to connect to the emotion another person is experiencing; it doesn't require that we have experienced the same situation they are going through.”³. Dr Yael Levine composed a prayer regarding infertility that beseeches on the compassionate side of God as expressed in his rebuke to Jacob⁴. While Jacob hadn't received such training, or heard such a quote, we have the ability to expanding our thinking and emotional capacity above and beyond that of Jacob.