

Book Review

Cardin, Nina Beth. *Tears of Sorrow, Seeds of Hope: A Jewish Spiritual Companion for Infertility and Pregnancy Loss*. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999.

Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin writes, as she states in the first paragraph of this book, out of her own experience. Longing for comfort from a Jewish perspective, this collection was born out of her “desire to uncover the hidden ways of women’s traditions in loss and fertility” (p. 13). Exploring a subject not much talked about outside of doctors’ offices and support groups, Cardin had to employ real research to gather her significant compilation of Jewish prayers, heartwarming poems and creative rituals. In her introduction, Cardin quotes a traditional source describing a woman who went to her rabbi for comfort following a miscarriage. “I cannot wipe away your tears,” she was told, “But I can show you how to make them holy” (p. 16). This is what Cardin herself proceeds to do, as she moves through this sensitive and deeply personal topic.

The first two chapters are written for the woman or couple as they try to conceive through sexual intercourse, including ways to incorporate *mikveh* (traditional ritual immersion). This section draws upon time-honored Jewish words and images, such as the Song of Songs, and creates relevant prayers and meditations for the occasion. Cardin provides prayers for conception to be recited by the couple and a Friday night candlelighting ritual. She makes here a brief notation of the needs of men, supplying a prayer to be said by the prospective father, but the focus and audience of the book remains women throughout. Borrowing from ancient folklore, Cardin creates a brief ritual for changing one’s name, as an attempt to alter fate and also reflecting the biblical Avram and Sarai, whose names were changed by God and who conceived a child in old age. The third chapter looks at specific holidays, recognizing the centrality and importance of the Jewish calendar in many of our lives. Each prayer or ritual blends with the themes of the holiday. Some are newly created and others are rooted in age-old practice, such as biting the stem of the *etrog* at Sukkot to encourage conception.

Chapter Four begins to look at the pain of loss. Acknowledging the anger, bitterness and despair that a woman might be experiencing, the poems and rituals given here allow for a wide range of responses and coping strategies. Noting that even a woman who has had more than one miscarriage may react very differently to each experience, Cardin suggests a variety of individual mourning ceremonies: planting, baking, speaking to the lost baby; and communal services, including *mikveh* or synagogue rituals. One nicely detailed ritual involves a full havdalah ceremony, marking the separation between being pregnant and no-longer-pregnant. Rosh Hodesh and the cycles of the moon are also natural associations for the symbols of fertility, loss and renewal. As a thoughtful note, Cardin offers specific words for a pregnancy terminated therapeutically, including a ritual created by Rabbi Amy Eilberg.

A very brief chapter contains prayers for “husband and wife” (p.113), rightly acknowledging and seeking to divert the stress that infertility can place on a marriage and healthy sex life. But herein lies my one criticism of this book: the complete assumption that the reader of these pages is a heterosexual, married female. Nowhere amidst the deep sensitivity and diversity of this volume

is there mention of the isolation of single mothers trying to conceive without the support of a partner (and since many single women decide to ‘go it alone’ after the age of 35, they will frequently struggle with waning fertility). Nor does Cardin give voice to the challenges and invisibility of lesbian mothers, whose options for conceptions are limited from the start, and whose quest for fertility begins with seeking a sperm donor and choosing the most appropriate means of artificial insemination. This absence does not take away from the value of what is here, but the absence is still notable.

Chapter Seven looks at pregnancy itself, within the scope of infertility, with the trepidation, suspense and fear of repeated miscarriage that surpass the normal anxiety of every pregnant woman. This section draws upon the richness of the *tekhines*, late medieval prayers of European Jewish women that centered on issues of fertility and childbearing. Cardin also gives mention to the centuries-old tradition of wrapping a red thread around the tomb of the biblical Rachel, who has been nearly a ‘patron saint’ of fertility for Jewish women through the ages.

Chapter Eight provides a range of comforting thoughts and prayers for use following a stillbirth. Without dwelling on the *halachic* laws and customs but making them available in an appendix for easy reference, Cardin focuses instead on the emotional needs of both parents and grandparents at this tragic time. Finally, she offers a beautiful *kaddish* written by Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael to mourn the loss of hope for biological fertility, to move forward after finally accepting that a pregnancy will no longer happen. For those choosing adoption, the book ends with a welcoming ceremony for a new child brought into the family.

One woman who has suffered two first-trimester miscarriages within the past year tried several of the ideas presented in this book. She has implemented the Friday night candlelighting ritual, some of the readings, and in a short ceremony that my husband and I attended, conducted the name-changing ritual mentioned earlier. She noted that these things gave her hope, connection to a larger community, and most importantly “something to do.” In a time filled with waiting and uncertainty, taking positive action gave her back a small feeling of control over her situation, and she found the Jewish aspect especially meaningful.

Drawing deeply from Jewish tradition, with enormous sensitivity to the emotional needs of her readers, Nina Beth Cardin has created a much-needed guide for approaching an issue long neglected by the Jewish community. Other life-cycle collections have touched upon pregnancy and fertility, and some of the rituals Cardin provides have been published in other volumes. But the wealth of material contained here, and the delicacy with which it is presented, is sure to offer at least some measure of comfort to everyone seeking solace around this topic. Cardin has written a beautiful, touching and necessary book.

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