

Ritual for Late Miscarriage or Stillbirth

There is a difference between not requiring mourning practices, and not allowing them. In an effort to spare parent's the imposition of the involved mourning practices when infant mortality was very high, babies were not considered full lives warranting these practices until they had survived the first 30 days. But parents going through the traumatic loss of a fetus need to be able to reclaim the rich and healing mourning rituals Judaism offers.

Women experiencing a late miscarriage or stillbirth have not had access to the traditional practices, the rituals of shiva (the 7-day mourning period), public burial, Kaddish, Yizkor, and gravestone unveiling. These mourning rituals are intended to help people experiencing loss process their grief and find comfort, while also giving their community the language and steps to provide support. A late term fetus is not considered by Jewish law to be a human being, yet it is a potential human being, with a degree of holiness associated with its human form and the potentiality this fetus represents to the parents of the life they were expecting, certainly by the 2nd or 3rd trimester to care for and raise. Judaism has the tools, and we must be allowed to use them to acknowledge that a life has been lost

This ritual is an attempt to claim these ancient practices, and add new creative ones, to provide the mother the ability to process her grief, and allow the public community to witness and support what she is going through. If there is no ritual, and no public mourning process, I believe it is much harder to move through the stages of grief and begin to heal. While I strongly believe there also needs to be a process and public

acknowledgment for both parents, as well as the immediate family, this ritual is focused on the woman's experience, which is unique.

The goals of this ritual are to allow the woman to express and process her pain, while being witnessed and comforted. By sharing their own stories of miscarriage and stillbirth as a circle of women, there is a potential for tremendous connection, support, and healing. Another goal is to help validate the woman completely with her identity as a mother. Since she carried and provided for this baby, protected, and loved this baby, she was, and will always be a mother to her baby. Even if she has no other children at this time, she remains a mother. The last goal is to provide the first transitional step out of the most intense first week of grief, and begin to return to normal life routines again. The circle of women present for the ritual may be her first experience back into the public community.

This is primarily a healing ritual, but it is also a transitional ritual, moving from the first 7 days of mourning whether the couple decides to practice a form of sitting shiva or not. This ritual marks the completion of the first week and the transition, while still mourning, back to the world of the living. It is also a transition from pregnancy into a new body that is no longer pregnant, and a new life that does not include caring for this child. This woman is going through all the physical discomforts in her body of recovering from childbirth, preparing to nurse a child, and all the hormones that go along with it. She is suddenly empty without this life she had been spending so much effort to provide for. This ritual ends with encouragement for the woman to begin imagining and hoping for what her next stage of life will be.

When I experienced a late pregnancy loss, even though I was part of a very liberal, renewal synagogue, I felt that I could not say kaddish or sit shiva. I felt pressure from my own traditional desires not to make more of the loss than I imagined was proper, dictated by halachah. I never met this baby, I didn't deserve to mourn like other mothers who experienced deeper loss than I did. But I was lucky that somehow I instinctively knew I still needed to honor what we had been through and to properly grieve. My husband and I, without the conscious decision to create ritual, ended up creating a series of beautiful rituals to hold space for and process our grief, and to communally share the experience with close friends in our community. We held the baby for a while at the hospital (something I insisted I wouldn't be able to do, then luckily changed my mind after labor). We had a short burial service with our rabbi, and we planted flowers at the grave. In our first initial days of grief, we went to a nearby stream, smashed pottery and screamed. We also had one day of "sitting shiva" where we invited friends to join us at our home. I believe each of these events provided a layer of healing. It also, by accident, offered healing for other women who shared their own stories with me, and found themselves reversing roles after their own losses, stepping into one of the comforter. It is from this experience that I draw on to create the following ritual for other women. I also acknowledge that due to the extremely personal nature, this ritual must be adapted to each person and their individual needs. What is comforting for one woman is off-putting or even painful for another, therefore much care is needed in crafting the language and actions. Not every woman will want to hear stories from other's similar experiences so soon, and amidst their grief. I would have to gently seek input from the participant before bringing this ritual into their home.

OUTLINE OF RITUAL

The Mishnah advises: "Do not try to comfort the mourner, as long as the deceased is still before him." This ritual begins on the 7th day of mourning, the 6th day after burial and after time alone with her partner has occurred. Women from the community who have also lived through late pregnancy loss or stillbirth are invited to join the woman in her home. Encourage them to treat this like other shiva calls, bringing food, sitting low on the ground on pillows or the floor, refraining from starting conversation before the mourner initiates, etc.

All the women sit together in a circle.

1. Begin by singing Carlebach's Nachamu Nachamu from Isaiah 40:1-2

נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יֹאמַר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, דַּבְּרוּ עַל לֵב יְרוּשָׁלַיִם וְקִרְאוּ אֲלֶיהָ

"Nachamu Nachamu ami, yomar Eloheichem. Dabru al lev Yerushalayim, v'kiru eilecha"

Console my people, don't ever stop consoling them. Speak into the heart of Jerusalem and call out to her.

2. One woman from the circle (or leader) reads:

"We are here to join with (mother's name), and hold her in this circle of grief. We are here for you, today and always. No one should have to go through the loss of a child. This life that never got to be was so precious. She was loved so deeply. She was cared for, protected, and sheltered so lovingly by this amazing mother. While we cannot console and take away her pain, we hope that our presence here today honors and comforts her in some way. We hope that by our sharing of this pain together, we can create a circle of connection that lifts her to new beginnings and healing.

3. The women go outside to a chosen spot and stand behind or around the mother. With them, they have a clay cup or vase full of water.

One woman reads: “Last week, your body was full of life as you anticipated the arrival of a beautiful being into your arms. Abruptly, you were left empty. We cannot begin to understand why this life could not grow into a child. I invite you to pour out your feelings, either out loud, as a cry, or quietly to yourself if you prefer, as you pour out the water, symbolizing the life you hoped to bring into this world, from the clay vessel.

The mother pours the water onto the ground.

Then, if the mother feels up to it, invite her to read the following words, or share some of her own words:

“God, I am weary and grieved. We were anticipating the birth of a child, but the promise of life was ended too soon. My arms yearned to cradle new life, my mouth to sing soft lullabies. My heart aches from the emptiness and the silence. I am saddened and I am angry. I weep and I mourn. Weep with me, God, Creator of Life, for the life that could not be.”¹

(Additional words)

“My vessel held for a time and nurtured a pure soul. Now my vessel is empty and broken”

The mother smashes the clay vessel. If this is not the desired symbolism for the woman, another option is the practice of kriah, tearing a piece of cloth or a chosen baby blanket.

¹ Adapted from Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, in *Lifecycles* ed. by Debra Orenstein, Vol. I, p. 45

Words can include “torn” instead of broken to connect with the change in action. (make a notch in it ahead of time to make the tearing possible).

4. While the smashing or tearing takes place, women sing:

Joey Weisenberg’s Min Hameitzar : מן המצר קראתי יה ענני במרחב יה

Min-hameitzar karati yah, anani bamerkhav yah.

Out of the depths I call to You, O God; You hear me fully when I call (after Psalm 118:5).

Together everyone says:

יהוה נתן ויהוה לקח יהי שם יהוה מבורך

Adonai natan, va'adonay lakakh, yehi shem adonay mevorakh.

God gives, God takes away. Blessed be the name of God (Job 1:21)

The pieces of the pottery can be buried in a previously dug hole, or if broken into a stream, left simply to be swept away.

(5. Optional Extra reading)

After the smashing pottery, a poem chosen for or by the mother to reflect her current feelings of brokenness, pain, and the glimmer of life and healing ahead. It is read by another woman in the circle:

What falls apart.

Cannot be put back together.

But when the sameness crumbles.

Creation peaks through.

Daring us.

Daring you.

To reveal your uniqueness.

To remove your shell.

And make your inside,

Out.

No, you will never be the same.

But becoming always does triumph holding.

Because when you let go of the old pieces,

You fall purposefully into who you are meant to be.

Poem by Devon Spier

6. At this time the women return inside the home and the mother is invited to say the Kaddish if she wishes to take on this practice. (Mourner's Kaddish text passed out to everyone present)

After the Kaddish, the women say together:

"May God comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem", and then say to the her, "Arise."

One or more chosen women accompany the mother for a walk around the block. The traditional process of finishing the week of shiva.

7. Women return to the house. Together they gift her a new (different looking) cup made from pottery. Those that want to now share a short story of their own loss and recovery experience. Allow as much time as desired for sharing stories. Food is eaten during this time. This creates a comfortable more informal setting to allow sharing to naturally occur.

At the end of each story, the woman who just shared pours some wine into the newly gifted cup. Just before pouring she offers this, or a similar phrase:

“Together we grieve, we cry for you and with you, and together we hold you as your vessel slowly becomes less empty and more full of life. As you emerge from the depths, the narrow places, may your voice and prayers be fully heard and answered.”

8. Mother lights a memorial candle and reads:

“Source of healing, help me and my family find healing among those who care for us and those for whom we care. Shelter us under wings of love and help us to stand up again for life even as we mourn our loss².

Leader reads: “May God who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, grant to this family refu'at hanefesh urefu'at haguf, a full healing of body and spirit, abundant blessing from loved ones, and an awareness of God's presence with them in their pain. As for the baby that was not to be, shelter this spirit, O God, in the shadow of Your wings, for You, God of parents, God of children, God of us all, guard and shelter us. You are a gracious and loving God. Guard our

² Adapted from the same prayer read earlier by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso. See footnote 1

coming and our going, grant us life and peace, now and always, for You are the Source of life and peace. May we as a holy community support and love our friends in times of pain as well as times of joy. And as we have wept together, so may we soon gather to rejoice. Amen.”³

9. End with the song by Nava Tehilah, Zamru L’Adonai from Psalm 98

Zamru L’Adonai B’chinor, b’chinor v’kol zimrah

Sing praises to Adonai with the harp, with the harp and the voice of melody.

³ Reading from Lifecycles Vol. 1: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones, ed. Debra Orenstein (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, NY