

Expecting Myself

For some women, one child is a dream come true. For others, the inability to conceive a fourth can be excruciating.

by SARA K. EISEN

The greatest irony about children is that both their arrival and their nonappearance change everything — there is no falling back on the status quo, at least not for a very long time. Once a child is born in your head, your existence is no longer as it was: Everything echoes of getting pregnant (or not), being and staying pregnant (or not), giving birth to a healthy child (or not), and being a mother (or... not). I believe this phenomenon is amplified in societies, like my Israeli Orthodox one, where family is meant to be at the epicenter of one's life, especially as a woman.

As it happens, my first child was born in reality long before he was ever born in my head. He arrived a month before our first wedding anniversary, having never been planned or otherwise; he just was. At the time, I was not yet 21. My husband and I never thought about the folly — or the blessing — of having a baby without thinking, trying or planning. Still kids ourselves, really, we took everything for granted: life, happiness and being the masters of our own destiny. We had just found each other, fallen madly in love and moved to a new country on our own. We could do anything we chose.

Our reeducation, and our adulthood, came quickly enough, a little over two years later, when I miscarried, twice. Suddenly, at 23, my girlhood body was a stranger. And it was not the residual curves from that first, huge and fruitful pregnancy that made it so.

It was that I had just lost the map and key to what my body did or could not do. There were doctors, hospitals, anesthetics and strange vacuum cleaners. There was a "history" to fill out, one that I didn't write for myself. I was learning that sometimes things choose you, and not the other way around.

And it was just the beginning, because at 24, five months into my fourth pregnancy — and already

showing — with what we hoped would become our second child, I was lying on the ultrasound table in the hospital's health fund clinic (a routine check, the one where you're supposed to find out whether it's a boy or a girl and then go out and pick a name and decide if you're telling people) when the technician paused. She paused for a long time. She said she needed to get the attending physician. She brought back a professor, who also paused for a long time, and called several residents. No longer just one with a history, I was quickly becoming a case study.

The professor, with kind blue eyes I will never forget, drew us a picture of a hypoplastic left heart. Our baby would, once outside the womb, have no way of pumping blood to and from his (atrophied) lungs. This baby would almost certainly die, if not in utero, then very soon after birth. Extensive surgery overseas could maybe — only maybe — buy him a few years (very few) of compromised life.

There were more medical experts and rabbinic consultations, social workers, forms and an ethics committee. For the sake of the son we already had, we chose, with the support of all of the above, induction at 22 weeks to terminate the doomed pregnancy. I remember thinking how young the residents looked, how they were probably going out for drinks after they finished inserting the pitocin balloon below my sick fetus's floating body. I was 24. I wanted to go with them, I wanted to laugh with them. I wanted to be them — to be in medical school. I had actually considered applying a few years before, but had, for better and worse, revised my plans when our son was born.

I was in labor for over seven hours during which I read Victor Frankel's manifesto, *Man's Search for Meaning* (about his experiences in Auschwitz and struggle to find reasons to live). I had no idea what it was about when I had taken it off the shelf and stuffed it in my bag that morning, but as I lay there praying for it to be over soon, the idea that suffering brings us to



Julie DeBon

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a better understanding of the world, and shapes us as people, was falling on fertile (well, infertile) ground.

On Sunday, we had gone in to count fingers and toes and came out with half a heart. It was Wednesday when we checked in to give birth to nothing. I remember lying on the couch at home on the Tuesday in between and feeling my baby kick. I explained to him that I would have to let him go back to where he came from, that he could not make it in this world. And that I hoped he'd come back. That I hoped he'd choose me. I prayed he'd choose me. Gone were the days where I even imagined it was something I could control.

By Saturday, I sat in the garden watching a beautiful August sunset, bleeding and leaking breast milk (which I continued to do for three months; the pills to prevent lactation did not work) and imagined that God came to pay me a get-well visit. I felt embraced, held by heaven. It kept me alive. I still believe it was real.

Not too long afterwards, our three-and-a-half-year-old son started having lots of bathroom accidents. As I was cleaning up one of them, he said to me, "Ma, don't worry, I'll be your baby." I was paralyzed. What an amazing, expressive child! I thought. And then: poor, poor kid. With all of my strength, I smiled and told him that I loved him as he was — as a big boy (the accidents stopped within days). But I cried in private for my empathic little boy who was also being hurt by our lousy luck.

I was mad at God.

My husband and I drifted apart; he did not possess the emotional language to realize his own grief, never mind touch mine. How could he grow up as quickly as I was doing, when nothing had ever died or lived in his body? My body seemed to be a death trap. I was very alone. To make matters worse, our neighbors were all on their third kids. This community-wide fecundity is very much part of everyday life and conversation where we live. With a compact family car, no stroller, and no midnight feeding stories, we could have felt unencumbered, but instead, we felt like outsiders. This intensified the fact that we also felt bereft, especially as my original "due date" approached — and the various babies who "made it" were born.

Our son would be turning four soon. "What a nice, big space you are leaving before your next one," is what people who did not know our story would say, and I would smile and try not to spit pitocin in their eye. The even bolder would remark, "Isn't it time for another one?" or "I hope you don't plan on making him an only child? Wouldn't that be a shame?" (This winner was from someone close who actually knew our story.)

It seemed that people were judging me, punishing me, or worse, envying me, for not being able to produce the thing I

wanted most in all the world. Each complaint about being kept up all night with a sick baby, each *brn* (my friends were having so many kids!) felt like a test: I would not be bitter. I would be happy for them. I would grow. I would grow. I would grow. I organized a lot of baby parties. I said the nicest, most generous things. I was so very positive. I was dying inside.

In our new and heavily mortgaged house for which we were both working mad hours, we had a child to take care of and three never-became-children, being mourned (or not mourned) by two no-longer-children; the oldest person in the whole mess was not yet 26. At this point, I tried to apply to med school. It seemed like the best revenge, even though I'm not sure I was as passionate about medicine as I had been at 21. When my math scores on the psychometric were too low, I had no emotional energy to take the test again. Everything was like that: not followed through. I had lost the ability, in the words of that famous affirmation, to discern between the things I could change and the things I couldn't.

Anyway, my strength was gone, and I was just waiting for something, someone to move for me. I didn't know this was called depression.

In retrospect, I think that our lives were on the brink of disintegration — I barely remember details from those days I spent disassociated from time and space and people — when God, in His grace and mercy and generosity, saved me from myself and let us get pregnant with a keeper.

My fifth pregnancy was, I think, the best documented creative process in history. Each time I went in to check if the little ball of cells was still there, with a pulsating center, I was choked with dread. When the screen showed that little fuzzy heart beat, it felt like I was saved. It felt like — well, like being born again.

The whole pregnancy lurched from milestone to milestone. I felt relieved, then newly nervous, thankful, then worried about something else. Until I saw that little scrawny minute-old chicken, I was sure God would be backing out on the deal. We named him "Doron," which means "gift." I checked the child's breathing every night until he was four.

Mortality had become real, and so had love. I understood fear and its ability to make you drop everything, or do anything. And I also understood that it changed nothing, added nothing. It was just another way to try to get control that none of us has. With new insights such as this one popping in my head like corn from morning till night, I started reading Jungian psychology, Eastern philosophy and mythology and thinking about my childhood. I started reconnecting to all of the lost places inside

me, to old friends, to my parents, my brother, my husband and my career aspirations.

Most of all, I was beginning to appreciate every minute in a way I never did before. (Some would argue that true growth would have required me to do so before, or without, the "happy ending," but I was, for whatever reason, not in that place before heaven extended its generosity first.)



June Deaton

I was feeling life in as visceral a way as I had ever felt it. I had quit my awful, dead-end job during the last weeks of my pregnancy and went back to work (all too briefly) at an Internet startup when Doron was nine months old. I painted walls (red) and lost 40 pounds. I danced with my kids and cooked gourmet meals and stood near the window when the sun was coming in. I stopped cutting my hair and wearing shoes. At 26, I was younger than I had been since before I got married. I was doing it over, and I wasn't going to miss anything this time. I wore high boots and short skirts and no one would have ever guessed without speaking to me that I was anyone's mother, or had ever wanted to be.

But it got complicated again at 28. Every woman has her own "magic number" (individual, often arbitrary, and influenced by her society, experiences, values, and, of course, her partner) — the family size that can finally bring peace of mind. For some women, one child is a dream come true; for others, the inability to conceive a fourth can be excruciating. I know that during my struggle to have a second child, hearing women with three children cry about a first trimester miscarriage was the ultimate test of my compassion and ability to suspend judgment. I didn't always pass.

In any event, we wanted a third child, miscarried early, tried again. And waited. In the meantime, I wrote a book. The market had crashed, the startup had closed. The book was about coming of age and running away from yourself only to always come back — to yourself. It took a little over a year. I was convinced that once I finished the manuscript, I'd be able to conceive. So I didn't sweat it out — too much.

I was right. I finished the book in February and got pregnant in March. But then, in May, I miscarried again. We were two for seven. Yes. I was still keeping score.

I know another child was something I wanted for me, and for us, as a family and as a couple (to us, having kids is about bringing new, good people into the world — the more the better, within the limits of our being able to raise them responsibly

and give them our attention), but the personal desire was compounded and made urgent by a huge load of external pressure. If not for this factor, I am sure we could have been more sanguine about the issue, especially considering how young we were.

But my kids, looking at their peers, kept asking why we didn't have another baby (or several). My husband rarely spoke about it, for fear of adding pressure to my hurt (although I wish he would have — I think), but I know that he,

too, was sad and frustrated by our situation. We were, in a neighborhood of more than 200 families; one of about 10 with fewer than three kids; my American sister-in-law was on her fourth in five years. And although we knew by now that this didn't "entitle" us to anything, it did put us in a place of always having to think about it.

I wanted very much to just be able to appreciate what I had and move on. I had already begun to feel instinctively what was important (family, love, God) and what wasn't (stuff, petty fights, ego.) But even in this "Zen" place, I could not let the desire to have another baby go. And I hated that I couldn't.

So we went back to the doctors when I failed to conceive again after about a year, which put yet a new category on our résumé (the first, awful sounding one was "habitual aborter"); secondary infertility. The waiting room in a fertility clinic contains more collective strength and courage than the Israeli Army. I'd like to note here that most women sitting there had stories that made mine look like (excuse the awful pun) child's play. Where do women find the resources to be prodded and invaded and disappointed for years on end, with only an unknown result at the end of lost years and a frayed sense of self? I did not know, but I loved those women.

My crazy uterus had given me a love and respect for women, a sense of solidarity, and had shifted my gravity away from being man-centered. My crazy uterus had grounded me and had made me a professional friend; I loved being a friend of women and having women friends — more than I ever had. There was no more competition as far as I was concerned. We were all in this together. I leaned on friends, and, for the first time, let others take care of me.

I found every woman I could who ever put progesterone in her mouth or feared her period more than death. And we talked. I had friends of all ages and outside of my community, and I made sure to keep them close.

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At home, I was surrounded by males. At one point during this cycle of trying to get pregnant, my older son told my younger son about the baby I had lost when he was three. I realized then that it was part of his story, too, that he could tell it whether or not I wanted him to. My younger son, himself three at the time, embraced this piece of family mythology with an equanimity unique to little children. "Ahh... so that's why we don't have a lot of babies," he intoned thoughtfully, "because babies die in your tummy." What could I say? That basically summed it up.

In the meantime, I had lost my cocky self-assurance, which had been replaced, I'm afraid, with an obsessive uncertainty about everything, a deconstruction of myself at every turn. I was softer and let more things in; I let everything in. I became the subdued poet, the choleric 18th-century writer, but instead of being self-absorbed (an occupational hazard, to be sure), I escaped by becoming enthralled with everyone else's story.

I went from party girl to bohemian, from man killer to lady hugger. I was involved with every committee at school and synagogue that would have me. I could not change the stupid stick from white to pink, but I would change the world.

I developed exceeding empathy to the point of blowing off newly acquired freelance work to listen to sad friends, and ultra-careful never to hurt anyone — so much so that it was very easy to convince me that everything was my fault. I was also desperately driven for literary success with my novel to make me forget that I felt like a failure as a woman. Strangely (or maybe not), this did not make me quite driven enough to do everything in my power to sell my book. I had a passion, but I was letting it burn there — letting it burn *me*. True to my earlier form, I stopped trying very hard, starting putting off calls and letters to agents, when I did not meet with immediate (or any) success. All of this made me into a doormat, a rock, or a hot-head, depending on which day you caught me. I turned 29.

I had a tantrum: I need a baby and a book by my 30th birthday! And a voice inside me, the one that had grown out of lots of womanly advice and the last time I'd felt this way, said: Choose, then go all the way with it (and be ready to relinquish one, or maybe both).

I chose baby. I know that many readers will probably feel that this seems shortsighted or exceedingly self-effacing, but it was the truer-to-myself choice stripped down — it was the one that was less about "ego" and more about attempting wholeness. And I know that others might have made the exact opposite choice for the very same reasons.

And so there were experts and fluid tests and cameras in

places that are not meant to be photographed. We were being "aggressive," but there was nothing wrong with me, as pronounced by a man who lectured around the world. My husband was reading all the letters of approbation on the office wall, but I was trying to read the professor's face: Does he think I'm just nuts?

My husband, by now a veteran, would send me sweet e-mails when my period inevitably came. He adopted a much more outgoing personality as I receded into more and more uncertainty. But what struck me as different from our past bouts with fertility issues was that this time, we spoke about it more openly, and we were in it together.

This time, there was a new connectedness to our narrative, an awareness of how we were living, that was in a way very gratifying, as much as it sometimes hurt. We knew that we were doing what grown ups do: accepting a life other than how we'd planned it and making the very best of it. We spent more time with the boys, did things you can't do with babies. We realized that experiencing things more fully with our pre-kindergartener and third-grader was a better idea than obsessing. It's not that we had given up; it's just that we were finally blessed with some of that elusive wisdom of knowing the difference between what we could change and what we couldn't. Still, there was a lot — a lot — of prayer, and there were more blood tests and doctors than I care to think about.

I think it surprised us when pregnancy eight commenced one month before my 30th birthday — and then lasted. The prayers had finally been answered and grew even more intense as the pregnancy progressed. Having long ago vowed to never take anything for granted again, we still pray, now in gratitude, as our third son is taking his first steps. We still can't believe he's ours. The older boys are totally in love.

We feel exceedingly blessed (and although not necessarily "finished," certainly "at peace"). Sometimes I feel very young again, like I did after my second son. Sometimes I feel very old, as I did before him. Most days, however, I just feel exhausted by work and home and (I won't count them) boys. When I want to complain about this, or about how slowly my career is progressing as a result (I still haven't made the time to work on selling my manuscript), I bite my tongue. It's a tiredness I would have once given my life for, and one I'm still prepared to.

It's what I chose, and what was chosen for me. The greatest blessing of all is having these, finally, harmonize — and being able to notice. And give thanks. ■

Sara K. Eisen is a freelance writer and editor living in Israel.