

by Bonnie and Lawrence Baron

Mourning the Loss of a Dream

HOW WE CREATED A RITUAL TO GRIEVE OUR INFERTILITY.

Instead of the joy of pregnancy, Lamaze classes, baby showers, and choosing names, we encountered innumerable medical tests, two miscarriages, six failed inseminations, and one devastating round of Pergonal that indicated ovarian failure. For four years we were tempted by new infertility advances until one day we chose to no longer endure the emotional, financial, and physical strains that accompany such high-tech treatments.

Before we could move on and decide between being child-free or adopting a child, we felt compelled to bury our hope of having a biological child. We worried that if we pursued adoption too quickly without mourning the loss of our dream, we could project the traits of our imagined biological child onto our adopted one.

DEVELOPING A RITUAL

Since we are Jewish, we searched for relevant Jewish customs and prayers to help ease our pain and assist us in making this transition.

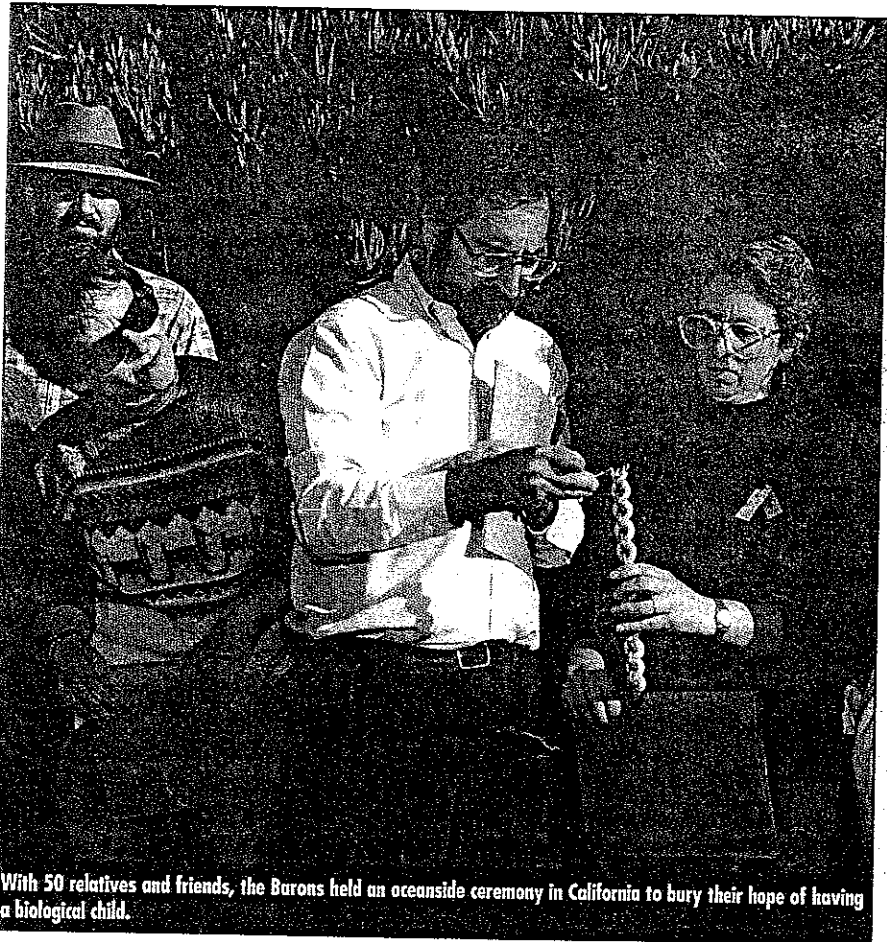
Unfortunately, we found little solace in the ways Judaism traditionally has dealt with infertility.

In Biblical and Talmudic sources, childlessness is interpreted either as a test of faith, divine punishment, or grounds for a husband to divorce his wife. Full Jewish burial rites are accorded only to infants who live 30

days after being born and not to miscarried fetuses or stillborn babies.

So we decided to write our own ceremony. We drew from Jewish and secular sources that related to our sense of loss and suggested ways we

might share the end of this major life crisis with our family and friends. For three days, we cloistered ourselves in our house, seeking Biblical passages, prayer books, and self-help books on coping with infertility. As we tearfully



With 50 relatives and friends, the Barons held an oceanside ceremony in California to bury their hope of having a biological child.

probed our depths of despair, we ignored all telephone calls and barely took time to eat. When we were finished, we had gone through reams of computer paper and boxes of Kleenex. Even though we had been in therapy and had participated in a local RESOLVE chapter, the intensity of creating this ritual *together* provided us with a catharsis more emotionally healing than we ever had expected.

HOLDING A CEREMONY

We held our oceanside ceremony on a warm California day with 50 relatives and friends. We began with a quotation from the Bible about Hannah's infertility and then compared Hannah's lament to a letter a woman had sent to a local doctor about her infertility. She wrote: "My infertility is a blow to my self-esteem, a violation of my privacy, an assault on my sexuality, a final exam on my ability to cope, an affront to my sense of justice, a painful reminder that nothing can be taken for granted. It is above all, a wound to my body, to my psyche, to my soul."

We spoke about how difficult it was to end infertility treatment given new

medical developments and the lingering possibility that a treatment might work the next time.

Consequently, we wanted to symbolize physically that we had abandoned our hope of having a biological child. To do this, we borrowed from a Jewish custom in which people attempt to start the New Year with a clean slate by casting bread crumbs representing their sins from the past year into a body of water. We threw croutons into the ocean to symbolize any remaining regrets and "what-ifs" we still might have had regarding our decision to stop trying to have a biological child.

Then we observed several Jewish mourning rituals but altered them to reflect that we were mourning the death of a dream and not the death of a person. We cut and wore blue and pink mourning ribbons rather than the traditional black ones. We wanted to symbolize the unknown gender of the biological baby we were grieving. We also included a contemporary miscarriage prayer composed by a woman rabbi that emphasized the loss of potential life. We concluded this part of the service with a collective

chanting of Kaddish, the Jewish mourning prayer that affirms faith in God without ever mentioning death.

We then ate symbolic foods from the Jewish New Year, condolence meal, and Passover. We dipped the egg of life into saltwater to represent tears and made a sandwich out of bitter herbs (for our bitter experience) and honey (for the joy we will have in the future). We also enumerated the 10 plagues of infertility that had enslaved us for four years: denial, anger, shame, marital stress, isolation, reproductive regimentation, uncompensated medical costs, depression, loss of control, and death of our dream of having a first born.

MARKING A NEW BEGINNING

At the end of the Sabbath, Jews perform a ceremony to separate this holy day from the rest of the week. We observed the same rituals to mark the end of our infertility experience and the beginning of our new life.

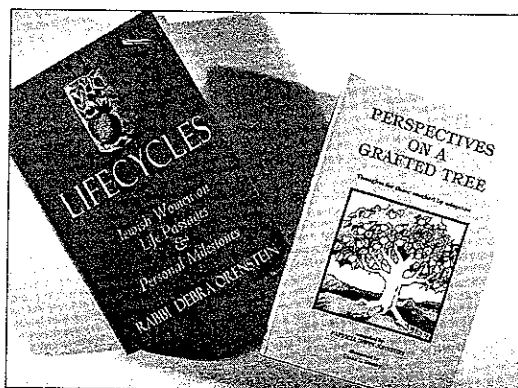
We finished our service by reading from a Jewish tale about a man who planned to divorce his childless wife. His rabbi commanded him to throw a party to celebrate the divorce just as

MORE IDEAS

Lifecycles 1: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones includes two rituals for adoption and rituals to mark other significant events. You'll find sensitive observances for miscarriage, infertility, and stillbirth in addition to rituals for divorce, menopause, parenting, and celebrating birthdays.

Published in November 1994, the book is available from Jewish Lights Publishing, Box 237, Woodstock, VT 05091; 1-800-962-4544 for \$24.95 plus \$3.00 for shipping.

Perspectives on a Grafted Tree is a collection of poetry about infertility, starting the adoption process, and adoption. It captures the wide variety of feelings surrounding loss, infertility, adoption, and the expectations of parenting a child. It is available from AFA for \$14.95. Use the order form between pages 40-41.



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he had celebrated his wedding. At the party, the husband told his wife to keep whatever item in his house was most precious to her. After he became drunk and fell asleep, his wife ordered her servants to carry him to her father's house.

When he awoke, she told him that he was the most precious thing to her. Moved by her love, he decided to remain married. In this spirit, we exchanged our blue and pink mourning ribbons for red rose

corsages to reaffirm our life as a couple.

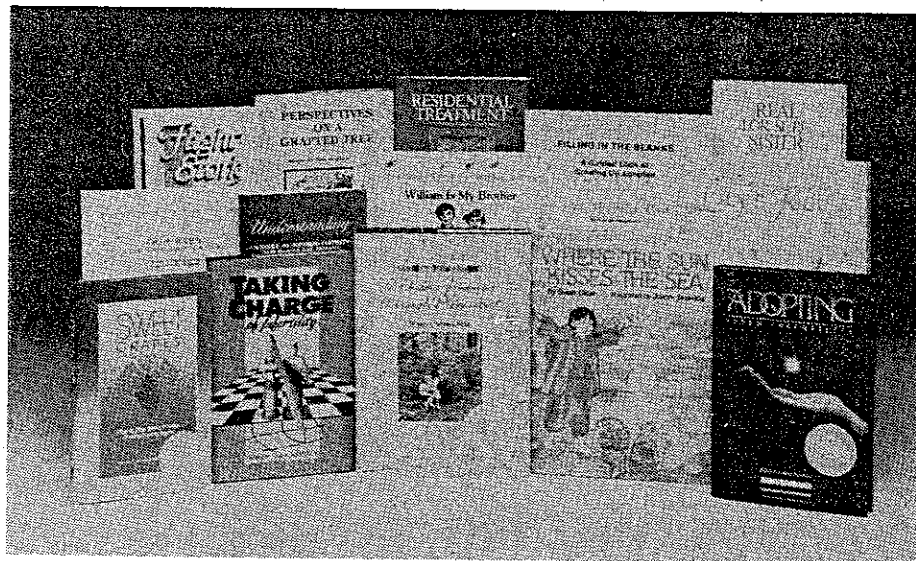
When we completed our ceremony, we asked people to express their reactions to it. About one-third of those who attended also had experienced infertility. Many of them thanked us for providing a public opportunity to grieve their own loss. Other relatives and friends remarked how the ritual had sensitized them to the private ordeal of infertility.

Since then, we have adopted a wonderful son, Ari. We are uncertain whether we could have been fully open to his uniqueness without having worked through most of the grief we had been carrying with us.

We hope our experience as a couple will enable us to empathize and support Ari's need to grieve the loss he eventually will feel for his birthparents. Whether it be through public ceremonies like ours, private rituals, journal writing, artwork, or other meaningful activities, people who adopt after infertility owe it to themselves and to their children to mourn and accept their inability to conceive a biological child. [AF]

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If adoption or infertility are the issues . . . We have the books!



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