

Elliot Jager

# THE PATER

MY FATHER, MY JUDAISM,  
MY CHILDLESSNESS

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## Chapter 1

# The Pater

**E**very Friday afternoon at precisely 2:30 p.m., from Jerusalem, I call my 90-year-old father in Benei Berak, a largely ultra-Orthodox town adjoining Tel Aviv. We speak in Yiddish – or rather, I shout into his deaf ears. In recent years, mercifully, the Pater – as I call him on the sly, borrowing from the 1981 British television serial *Brideshead Revisited* – has become mildly tolerant of small talk. Has the grocer's delivery arrived? I ask. Or, he might volunteer – muddling the numbers – his blood pressure results taken by the visiting nurse. He might even, if prompted, fill me in on his wife's ingrown toenails. Any substantive communication, however, necessarily revolves around religious topics such as the *parasha*, the weekly Torah reading. He entreats me to recite the Book of Psalms faithfully and to observe the Sabbath fastidiously.

Reflexively, the Pater turns our Friday conversations to my being childless and invariably recommends that I seek out one or another miracle-making holy man. He collects names and brochures

complete with toll-free numbers and bank deposit details. He scoffs when I tell him that Lisa and I have been to doctors, and there is nothing to be done. It's his absolute conviction that only divine intercession, mediated by a well-connected cleric, will make it possible for us to produce a man-child even now.

The Pater knows that the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Rachel were all blessed with sons only late in life. I say that, unlike him, I am not a Hasid; that I'm a *Mitnaged* (opponent of Hasidism) and do not seek the intervention of a wonder-worker. I tell him my own prayers will have to suffice. This is a line he can get his head around even if he disagrees. It stretches the truth about my faith, but it's what I think he can handle.

My father's compulsive preoccupation with my childlessness is all the more ironic because when I was a child he abandoned me – twice. After he went away for the second time, I didn't see or speak to him for thirty years. And when I thought about him, if I thought about him at all, it was mostly with smoldering resentment. Now, the process of our halting reconciliation, which is in a race against time, is overshadowed by his unwanted, intrusive labors to move Heaven so that my sentence of childlessness will be lifted.

I wish we could talk about other things. Maybe like how much he thought about me after he left New York. In the 1960s, a boy growing up in a single-parent home was an anomaly in our strictly Orthodox milieu. In fact, it was remarkable in America at large, where only 11 percent of children in the US lived apart from their fathers, according to the Pew Research Group.<sup>1</sup> At the Sassover Rebbe's Eighth Street *stiebel*, the Lower East Side storefront synagogue I attended, I felt conspicuous as I tried to navigate the *davening* (prayer services) on my own. And on the High Holy Days, someone else's father – usually Shaya Kamenetsky – pulled me under his *tallit*, along with his son,

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1. Gretchen Livingston and Kim Parker, "A Tale of Two Fathers: More Are Active, but More Are Absent," June 15, 2011, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/06/15/a-tale-of-two-fathers/>.

Avrumi, shielding us with his prayer shawl from the mystical rays emanating from the *kohen*, Mr. Kraslow, whose hands were raised in the priestly blessing.

I didn't much miss my father, but his absence was more than just a nuisance. There was that Friday when I was in ninth grade at Mesiftha Tiffereth Jerusalem, and Rabbi Wasserman, the one religious studies teacher in the school I ever liked – and, now that I think about it, himself childless – offhandedly instructed us to bring a “note from your father” when we returned on Sunday certifying that we had profitably redacted a passage in the Talmud over Shabbos. Well, that sent me into a tizzy. At age fourteen, I didn't realize that Rabbi Wasserman probably already knew that my father was out of the picture; and I was too self-conscious to tell him that I didn't have a father to write a note for me.

Plainly, my mother was in no position to do it, though she came up with a suggestion: that we get one from Rabbi Usher Halpern, known in Yiddish as the *Dembeker Ruf*, a humane Old World clergyman who was on a sort of retainer to my mother's extended family. While she had tea with Rebbetzin Halpern, I took a blind stab at the talmudic passage with the *Dembeker*, who, when the Sabbath went out, kindheartedly wrote the requisite note for Rabbi Wasserman.

The Pater's disappearance also left my mother and me without money in a moribund Jewish neighborhood that was increasingly coming under violent, anti-Semitic siege – or so we felt – by Puerto Ricans and Blacks. Over time, the Sassover *stiebel*, and later the large Shneer Synagogue, a pink Moorish structure on Madison and Montgomery streets, were among any number of East Side synagogues fire-bombed, torched, or vandalized.<sup>2</sup> Jewish youngsters were routinely harassed. Jewish elderly were mugged with a vengeance. Unlike middle-class Jews who had made better lives for themselves in the suburbs or in more upscale sections within the five boroughs, we poor and working-class Jews were left behind to rub shoulders with New York City's burgeoning underclass, sharing tenements and housing projects.

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2. “Synagogue Fire-Bombed On the Lower East Side; Gasoline Spilled Near Door,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 1973.

This was my Lower East Side, bounded by the FDR Drive on the east, First Avenue on the west, 14<sup>th</sup> Street on the north and the Williamsburg Bridge on the south. How I envied my buddies who lived on the better side of the Williamsburg Bridge in the enclave of lower-middle-class “co-ops,” constructed by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, along Grand Street and East Broadway.

Still, I was a fairly popular kid and I managed to have my share of fun growing up. In elementary school, I always made the Chasam Sofer schoolyard punch ball team. At home, my mother catered to me – a finicky, furtively anxious child. The regulars at Sassover kind of adopted me. The Rebbe’s son, Shulem Luzer Rubin, though a few years my senior, was my shul buddy. Jack and Morris Schechter, two bachelor brothers whose waning tin and roofing business stood forlornly across from the *stiebel*, would push plates of the rebbetzin’s gefilte fish and *arbis* (chickpeas) my way during *shalosh seudos*, the ritual meal that marks the end of the Sabbath. There was also plenty of Ballantine Ale on offer, had I been able to stomach it.

The longer the Pater was gone, the more adept I became at airbrushing him out of my life story. No wonder my school and shul chums assumed that my father was dead. It must have struck them as peculiar, though, that I never recited *Kaddish* or the *Yizkor* memorial prayer.

But I can’t airbrush out my childlessness.

## *Chapter 2*

# In Vitro, If You Can

**C**hildren had not really been on the agenda during my brief first marriage. For many years afterwards, to the extent that I even allowed myself to dream about a better future, I was hoping more for an enduring, loving relationship than for marriage and a baby carriage. But meeting Lisa in Israel was the best thing that happened to me. So the idea of creating a family with her didn't terrify me; whatever my neuroses were, they were not going to dominate my life. We were mature, level-headed, conscientious adults. Given my history, I approached the idea of kids as an awesome responsibility, but one that we were ready for.

Yet three years into our marriage, we were not getting pregnant.

Lisa was in her late thirties, so maybe age was a contributing factor. Tests showed I had poor sperm motility. Still, hadn't doctors time and again overcome just such hurdles? And so, with composed optimism, we began treatment – breaking away from our respective offices to keep appointments at Jerusalem's Hadassah Medical Center



IVF clinic on Mount Scopus.<sup>1</sup> We started out hopefully enough with the standard medical and social intake assessments. Next came exams, lab tests, ultrasonography, and referrals to outside consultants, including endocrinologists and urologists.

Lisa had to take potent hormonal drugs and undergo repeated surgical procedures, which necessitated mild anesthesia, to re-implant her eggs, which had been fertilized by my sperm in a test tube. My role was simply to relive the inglorious moments of my adolescence, girlie magazine in hand – only this time under doctor’s orders. But the eggs that were fertilized in the lab and inserted into Lisa’s uterus didn’t take hold, for reasons that never became quite clear. Was it just bad luck? Were Lisa’s eggs too frail? Did my sperm have a built-in self-destruct mechanism?

I couldn’t help thinking back to my years at the New York City Health Department, where one of my jobs had involved working with a device that utilized a radioactive particle to detect lead in the homes of children diagnosed with lead poisoning. Employees had been repeatedly assured the machine was safe. Still, I wondered.

After each failed round, we’d return to the oval waiting room, modern, sun-drenched, with smiling baby pictures on the wall and physicians’ offices around the perimeter. We’d occasionally be taken aback to see someone we knew, though the effect was more a sense of camaraderie than embarrassment. We now see some of these same women around our neighborhood, children in tow.

Our travails at Hadassah coincided with the second intifada (2000–2005), during which Palestinian terrorism, most notoriously in the form of café and bus suicide bombings, claimed over a thousand Israeli dead and six thousand wounded. Yet in the surreal cocoon of Hadassah’s east Jerusalem IVF clinic we might, on any given day, be assigned to an Arab physician who was treating us with professionalism and empathy, even as, next door, a Jewish doctor might be working likewise with an Arab couple. And, save for incidental

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1. People imagine in vitro fertilization or IVF has been around forever. Actually, the first “test tube baby” was born in 1978 thanks to the pioneering work of Professor Sir Robert Edward and Dr. Patrick Steptoe in Britain.

expenses, it didn't cost any of us a penny – or in Israeli currency, an *agora*, because all citizens and permanent residents of metropolitan Jerusalem – Jews, Arabs, Christians, and Muslims – are eligible for fertility treatment, gratis.

As a matter of national policy, little Israel is the country most committed to IVF. Just how deep-rooted this obligation is becomes apparent when you consider what happened in the early 2000s when it was challenged by the Finance Ministry on budgetary grounds.<sup>2</sup> In Knesset (parliamentary) hearings on the Treasury's proposal to cut the budget for IVF, Finance Ministry civil servants told lawmakers that there had been a 54 percent increase in IVF spending from 2000 to 2009. The tab was covered in the basic "health basket" – meaning that IVF was treated like a flu shot or blood pressure medicine: if you needed it, you got it. Reproduction assistance covered diagnosis and therapy for both couples and non-married childless women.

The mandarins at Finance tried to frame the discussion about IVF in straightforward public policy terms: There were limited resources; IVF was an indulgence; plainly it mustn't be allowed to take precedence over, say, cancer treatment or geriatric rehabilitation facilities. Proponents of universal free IVF came back with what amounted to a national security counter-argument. Making babies was a strategic need. Israel was a small country, demographically outnumbered, and surrounded by intractable enemies. Jews needed to remain the decided majority between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea in order for the polity to remain both Jewish and democratic. The claim was put forth that it was less expensive to make babies at home than pay for mass immigration from the Diaspora.

Tellingly, pragmatic arguments about balance sheets and demographic interests didn't sway the Knesset members. What seemed to make the difference in Israel's inimitable sociocultural milieu was the emotional argument, which came from across the political spectrum. From Palestinian Arab nationalists like Ahmed Tibi (who, not

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2. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Sigal Gooldin, who specializes in the sociology and anthropology of medicine, explained the debate in the April 2013 issue of the *Journal of Social Science and Medicine*.

incidentally, is a Hebrew University-trained gynecologist), to non-Zionist ultra-Orthodox MKs (Members of the Knesset), to Zionist security hawks, to dovish liberals – all coalesced behind the idea that Israeli citizens have an intrinsic “right” to parenthood, viewing infertility as a treatable ailment and IVF not only as a cure, but as a citizen’s entitlement.

Men and women struggling to become parents testified before the Knesset during committee hearings, invoking this “right” to build a family. Paraphrasing the famous talmudic dictum (Nedarim 64b), one MK from the ultra-Orthodox Sephardi Shas Party declared, “If you don’t have children you are as good as dead.” He spoke of the angst experienced by childless couples: “Everything is extinguished. There’s no happiness, just sadness.”

A fertility expert testified in no less poignant terms, describing the “disease” of infertility as “no less fatal than cancer,” and painting the psyches of those affected this way: “The woman is ostracized, the man cannot be part of the community, and the family ceases to exist.” The recurring theme articulated by lawmakers, witnesses, and experts from disparate backgrounds was that family had a singular place in Israeli society – in both the Jewish and Arab communities.

And the most important element of family is children.

In the words of one MK: “Who among us can say that he would forgo a child? No one!” In fact, went the argument, no one should be expected to “make do” with only one child. A dovish MK said that talk of demography was beside the point. All that really mattered was “the uncomplicated need that society has to provide for couples who want to have more than one child.” A rabbi-physician told a hearing: “We are dealing here with the creation of human life, and with the issue of realizing the right to parenthood. This is a basic right.”

The Finance Ministry lost the budget battle and money was removed from elsewhere in the social welfare budget to protect the special place of IVF. By 2012, this “basic right” was extended to same-sex couples.

Each new day brings further advances in IVF technology, yet it’s hardly the case that IVF guarantees success. All things being equal – age, health, physician skills – most women in their thirties and forties *don’t*

get pregnant. In our age bracket the success rate is about 20 percent. In Israel, taken as a whole, the IVF failure rate is a staggering 75 percent. These failures are attributed 30 percent of the time to women and men equally, to both jointly in 18 percent of the cases, and to no known reason 21 percent of the time. There are no empty picture frames in IVF clinic waiting rooms for all the babies that didn't get made.<sup>3</sup>

After five or six grueling rounds – each cycle takes about six weeks not counting waiting in between – Lisa and I decided we'd had enough. On top of everything else, we worried about the long-term consequences of the hormones she was taking. Thus, we became part of the dismal statistic: some 30 percent of infertility cases worldwide go unexplained.

Not long ago, former British Labour Party figure David Miliband described his IVF experience as “drawn out,” “difficult,” and “emotionally exhausting.” There came a point when the Milibands too realized they “had reached the end of the line and we weren't going to give birth.” They ultimately opted to go through the “daunting” process of adoption in the US and are now the parents of two young children. (David Miliband currently heads the US-based International Rescue Committee.) Although David and Louise Miliband are at least ten years younger than us, and maybe a little better connected, the question remains: Why didn't Lisa and I consider other avenues, like adoption or surrogacy?<sup>4</sup>

All I know is that, like the Milibands, we were emotionally drained and frustrated; we were also angry about our fate. Adoption isn't an easy process, especially not in Israel, and it would have required a resilience we just didn't have at the time. Given our ages, we

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3. See, for instance, “Number of IVF births in Israel rises in last decade,” *Jerusalem Post*, April 20, 2012; and “Over 4 percent of all babies born in Israel are conceived through IVF,” *Jerusalem Post*, June 8, 2014: “One-quarter of in vitro fertilization (‘test-tube baby’) treatments result in a pregnancy and one-fifth in a live baby,” writes Judy Siegel-Itzkovich. See, too, “Pregnant in Medical School,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2013, on unexplained infertility.

4. Surrogacy raises far more complicated issues in Jewish law than IVF, as we'll see further on. Suffice it to say that surrogacy has been legal, though hardly commonplace, in Israel since the mid-1990s.

were probably not prime candidates for a healthy local baby. Adopting from abroad would have entailed battling bureaucracies – foreign as well as Israel’s own formidable officialdom. And it would not have been cheap, though that was not the deciding factor.

Moreover, I told myself that I wasn’t interested in a trophy child – which was how I imagined one that wasn’t our biological offspring. And anyway, adoption or surrogacy would not have changed the fact that I was the last of my line on my mother’s side. The only child of an only child. The decision may appear short-sighted, but that’s how I felt. Since neither Lisa nor I were ardently *for* adoption or surrogacy, we let those possibilities slide.

A friend once asked if we went through something like Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s neat five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Real life isn’t that straightforward. I felt anger, that’s for sure. Especially when I read about children abused, abandoned, even murdered by their parents. Why would God give children to people who didn’t want them or couldn’t care for them, instead of to us?

To the extent that we are at peace with our childlessness and our decision not to adopt – it is thanks to a remarkable, humane, empathetic couples’ psychologist named Edna Dolan. Edna came recommended by a close friend, and for a good number of months, first as we wound down IVF and then as we mourned the loss of the child we would never have, she became our emotional life-raft. Lisa and I usually met with Edna in her Mevaseret Zion home-office, located on a steep hilltop just outside Jerusalem. Israeli-born, Edna’s excellent English came in handy, since we were not about to deal with these issues in anything but our native tongue.

We hashed out our raw feelings about a lot of things, including adoption. We did a lot of crying. Edna was our safe haven at a time when everything seemed fraught and precarious. She taught us how to listen to each other using a technique called mirroring. Sometimes I’d hear Lisa say something, but in a cognitive process of which I was only semi-aware, I’d reinterpret her feelings to fit my own preconceived notions. So to make sure lines of communication were truly open between Lisa and me, Edna showed us how to mirror, listening

methodically and then prefixing our replies with, “I hear you saying that...”. It may sound banal, but allowing ourselves to be clear about our feelings helped us secure and strengthen our relationship against the ravages of failed IVF treatments.

When I decided to write about Edna, I wanted to check the appropriateness of it with her first. I soon discovered the sad news that she had died of cancer some years ago. That hit me. We had last seen her when we paid a *shiva* (condolence) visit after Edna’s teenage son died in tragic circumstances. It took me weeks to find the right moment to tell Lisa that Edna herself was now gone. May her memory be a blessing.

As for why Lisa and I did not try surrogacy, that would have been even more problematic than adoption. I understand that some folks pay over \$100,000 to make babies using someone else’s egg, someone else’s womb, and someone else’s sperm. It might be right for some couples, but we weren’t enthusiastic about the idea of leasing a womb – or more – from another human being, possibly in some underdeveloped country. It would have forced us to wrestle with legal, ethical, and halakhic questions at a time when our emotional stamina was low.<sup>5</sup> It was also true that while we knew people who’d adopted or gone through the IVF process, we just didn’t know anyone who had gone the surrogacy route.

Lisa and I know any number of women who long to get married and have children, but simply have not found the right partner. Some of our friends, men and women, find the sting of loneliness less painful than the possibility of hurt that necessarily comes with attempting an intimate relationship. Of course I’m glad for the women in our circle, mostly Lisa’s friends from before we were married, who had the spunk to go through IVF and bring children into this world on their own. It fascinates me that their children are growing up without dads, and I wonder if they feel “fatherless” despite never having lost one to death, divorce, or abandonment.

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5. Rabbi David Golinkin, “What Does Jewish Law Have to Say About Surrogacy?” *Responsa*, Schechter Institute, December 2012.

Meanwhile, I can't help but think what-might-have-been thoughts as I observe children around us throwing age-appropriate tantrums, taking on likeable personas, cracking jokes, and gradually reaching bar or bat mitzva age. On such occasions, even as I take joy in the happiness of my friends and relatives, I would be dishonest to deny a sense of melancholy that Lisa and I can only be spectators to such milestones.

Not being a parent has attuned me to the various hues of childlessness.

After our failed IVF experience I made a (for me) monumental decision – though at the time I didn't admit a connection because, really, it was the culmination of a number of factors.

I took off my *kipa*.

*Frum* – religiously observant – from birth, I wore a yarmulke on the tough streets of the Lower East Side in the '60s and '70s, mostly without thought or choice, though sometimes defiantly in the face of abuse and bullying from my Puerto Rican neighbors. I continued to wear it for the twenty-three years I worked in New York City government. I attended meetings on behalf of my agency in some of New York's worst neighborhoods, wearing my yarmulke.

It was a decision that had been percolating for some time. Theologically, I no longer believed myself to be Orthodox, and worried I was putting up a false front. And in Israel, what one wears or doesn't wear on one's head is laden with political, religious, and cultural connotations. At the time, however, I didn't admit to myself – much less to anyone else – that there was a deeper impetus for the decision, and it wasn't just a desire to avoid phoniness.

The first few days, it was awkward to go bareheaded. At work, several people asked me what was going on. None got a straight answer because I didn't have one. Instead, I resorted to my lifelong fallback: I made a joke and changed the subject. But the truth was I felt let down by the Creator of the Universe and I needed to let Him know. I felt God had hidden His face from me, and keeping my *kipa* in my pocket was a form of personal protest. It was also a belated rebellion against my spiritually wasted yeshiva years. And

it was my own silent stand against those who defame God's holy name by behaving badly with little thought to the yarmulkes on their heads.

At first, my decision left me uneasy. In the Diaspora, yarmulkes are partly intended to declare membership in the tribe, to identify Jews among gentiles. In Israel, they are more like bumper stickers. Jewish Israeli men are defined not only by whether they wear a *kipa*, but by its style – velvet, large, and black for the ultra-Orthodox, knitted for the national-religious, and endless variations in between.

In post-biblical times, Jewish custom demanded men and (married) women cover their hair: women for the sake of modesty, both sexes as a sign of God above. A mid-nineteenth century code of Jewish conduct and law held that “a man ought not to walk four cubits” bareheaded because doing so “suggests overbearing pride, ignoring God's omnipresence.”<sup>6</sup> By the seventeenth century, Jews made a point of covering their heads in contradistinction to Christians, who even prayed bareheaded.

I had never explicitly tied the decision to stop wearing a *kipa* to my childlessness – to feeling abandoned by my Father in Heaven. In hindsight, though, it seems as if it was integral. Much later I told my friend George about my *kipa* saga, and he said that whenever he hears that some great personal misfortune has led X to change his view of life, or of God – “and I definitely include myself in this, and I speak from my own experience” – he wonders whether the evidence was there all along but X ignored it, or its implications, until the misfortune happened to him personally.

Addressing himself to my case, George said: “You must have known long before you met Lisa that there were childless people who longed for children and would have made good parents, but that knowledge didn't have much effect, if any, on your attitude to God. The fact that He had let other people down didn't make much impression on you. That is, in a sense, quite obvious and understandable;

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6. It is not clear that during talmudic times people covered their heads. In modern times, certain Orthodox halakhic authorities have permitted men to go to work bareheaded when circumstances require it.



but once you start to think about it, it raises questions about us and our capacity for fellow-feeling.”

I can't disagree.

Dan Lobel,<sup>7</sup> whom I knew from my days as a technical writer at a high-tech firm in Tel Aviv, is one of those lanky, earnest, analytical people who don't make you feel uncomfortable for not sharing their spiritual passions. I joke that he'd make a good Jewish Dalai Lama. He's principled, ascetic, and always seems to stay on an even keel. Like me and Lisa, he and his wife Tzipi tried IVF only to find it did not work for them.

Born in Toronto, Dan was already in his thirties when he embarked on a two-year trek, mostly in Asia, in search of some greater purpose to his life. His parents were non-practicing Reform Jews who only rarely attended Temple. They perfunctorily sent him to Sunday school, where his interest in Judaism remained, unsurprisingly, dormant.

“I was on a shoestring budget when I arrived in Jerusalem in the autumn of 1995. Costs were considerably more than what I had become accustomed to in Asia. So, I started working as a night check-in clerk at a hostel,” Dan recalls. “I was meeting all sorts of travelers who were saying things like, ‘Isn't Jerusalem awesome and spiritual?’ and it just wasn't clicking with me. I was in a funk, sleeping during the day, getting up at 5 p.m. for ‘breakfast’ just as the sun was going down, and spending my nights folding guests' laundry, emptying ashtrays and cleaning toilets. I was considering moving on when my travel buddy suggested I do a class. He said that Aish HaTorah, in Jerusalem's Old City, was running a seminar. So I took off a few nights from work and went.” Dan enrolled first in Aish HaTorah and later at Ohr Somayach, two academies which specialize in *kiruv*, making Orthodox Judaism accessible to unaffiliated young Jews, most of whom do not stay on in Israel.

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7. It takes a lot of courage to talk about a sensitive subject, especially for the first time and to a stranger. To protect the privacy of men without children whom I interviewed for this book, I changed their names, disguised certain non-germane autobiographical details and, sometimes, the precise circumstances of our dialogue.

“I recall signs directing participants to the Aish building – things were more Spartan than today – with the word ‘Discovery’ and arrows pointing you through the maze of Jerusalem’s Old City. And below the arrows was the catchphrase: ‘If you have questions....’ I recall thinking to myself, ‘Questions? What questions? I don’t have any questions.’ God was completely off my radar at that point. But the program turned out to be fascinating, touching on religion, history, philosophy, science. Although I had no questions going in, I came out with a whole pile of them.” Dan studied three months at Aish and another three at Ohr Somayach. By the time he returned to Canada he was on an Orthodox trajectory.

He eventually found his way back to Israel where, at a Shabbat luncheon, he met another English speaker, an attractive, tender-hearted social worker with a porcelain complexion named Tzipi. The chemistry was just right.

As I sat speaking with Dan in their living room, he told me about their journey through infertility treatments. Within two years of their marriage, seeing they weren’t getting pregnant, the couple began IVF at Jerusalem’s Hadassah Hospital on Mount Scopus – the same place Lisa and I had undergone our treatments. They told almost no one. He was 44 and she was 37.

It turns out that Tzipi has an unbearable fear of needles, and the IVF process requires that you inject yourself at the same time every day with hormones. She tried it for a while, but just couldn’t do it herself. So Dan would go to her workplace to give her the jab. “There we were in the storage room among grimy documents, decaying newspapers, and stale, empty beer bottles. Me with the syringe in my hands, Tzipi often bursting into tears. Finally, she just completely dissolved. She couldn’t carry on. I can’t say I was surprised. When Tzipi goes for an immunization, she practically passes out.”

Dan’s story reminded me of how Lisa would sometimes show up at *The Jerusalem Post*, when I was an editor there, for her jab. We’d lock ourselves in the dusty newspaper morgue for the procedure. We, however, came out smiling – God only knows what my colleagues surmised.

Dan told me he was angry – at Tzipi, at himself, at the situation – for something like twenty-four hours. “Then I said to myself, ‘OK. It hurts. And I wish we could do something about that. But nothing hurts me more than seeing Tzipi hurting.’” Afterwards, he told me, “I just decided everyone has their limits about certain things, and what’s the point of being angry? She had reached her limit – there was no doubt.

“People think IVF is as simple as popping an aspirin,” Dan added. “They don’t have problems having children, and only become aware of those who do when they hear about a successful IVF outcome. Most people going through IVF don’t broadcast it. So if they are unsuccessful, no one will ever know; outsiders will never get a sense of the percentage of failures vis-à-vis successes.

“People whom IVF has failed, for one reason or another, are not flag-wavers. I’m in that 75 percent.”

Barely catching their breath after their IVF ordeal, Dan and Tzipi decided to adopt a child. “We went through all the hoops. All the meetings, interviews, paperwork, psychological evaluations, a day-long psychometric exam, for which we paid NIS 2,500 (\$680). There was a hilarious interview with a psychologist who was evaluating our answers and showing us, I swear to you, Rorschach blots, asking us what we saw; it was like out of a movie. I couldn’t believe people still did that.

“So we went through all of that. And the last phase for getting approved for adoption is that they come for a visit to make sure you don’t live in filth, with rats. The social worker came to our home and saw that we were clean and normal. She told us that everything was good to go: ‘You guys should have no problem getting accepted.’”

Because of their ages, they were not eligible to adopt a healthy newborn, though they could adopt a child between ages six and ten who most likely would come with some disadvantage or impairment. Dan had concerns about the undertaking, but was willing to go ahead anyway. Now, it was just a matter of getting written confirmation in the mail after the adoption approval committee had made

its formal decision. Weeks stretched into months and still Dan and Tzipi heard nothing.

Then, out of the blue, came an awful blow. Dan became aware of a growth, and his worst fears were realized when the biopsy results came back positive. A random unexpected occurrence had fundamentally changed Dan's life. He went from prospective new dad to cancer patient.

"We were on the cusp of adoption, and God said no.

"About two weeks into dealing with the cancer horror, we got a call from the social worker asking if we were coming to the parenting class. It's the class you have to go through once you've been approved. And then you can adopt.

"And we said, 'Approved?'

"'Didn't you get the letter?'

"'No.'"

They never did get the letter of approval. And because of Dan's cancer treatment, they couldn't attend the class.

Although Dan is now in remission, he still hasn't regained his full stamina, and he and Tzipi are no longer sure the conventional adoption program they were involved in makes sense for them. They are exploring becoming emergency foster parents – "for when the cops have to pull a child out of the house at 3 a.m. – the catch being you have to be willing to care for three children at a time, under the age of six, who are all coming from trauma," Dan explains.

Still another program they're considering would allow them to adopt the newborn baby of a drug addict. The catch is that such an infant would essentially go through withdrawal, and may need detoxification. By signing up for the program Dan and Tzipi would be on a fast track to becoming the infant's permanent adoptive parents. The downside is that such a child may well be damaged by their prenatal exposure to narcotics, and there is no guarantee Dan and Tzipi would be approved to officially adopt the infant. They might care for it for six months or more while its legal status is clarified, only to be told they must give up the child.

It's not a frivolous decision, and they're waiting until Dan feels more like himself before making the final call.

I asked him what he tells people when they casually ask if he has children. He said his stock answer is, “No, *be’ezrat Hashem* – God willing.” When I raised an eyebrow, he replied, “Look, Tzipi hasn’t gone through menopause. We’re still in the game. A miracle can happen. Why not?”

Of course, I said, there are all these folks who purposefully opt not to have kids. They wonder about the wisdom of bringing children into the world. Some worry that they won’t be good parents. Some had such traumatically lousy childhoods that they can’t imagine having the inner resources to give a child what he or she needs. Dan reserved judgment. “There is more than selfishness to consider. There are people who think the world is such a mess, they don’t want to bring kids into it.”

Dan and I agreed that this stance is somehow un-Jewish. However, Dan then surprised me by asking, “But what makes it ‘un-Jewish’ in your eyes?” My reply was knee-jerk. It is “un-Jewish” because Jews are part of a collective, and in order to have quality, we also need quantity. “That’s like a fascist view of Judaism,” Dan countered. “That everything is done for the nation.”

I recoiled at the fascist accusation. Had I the presence of mind, I might have quoted Emil Fackenheim’s proposition about not giving Hitler any posthumous victories. We need to make lots of babies *aufzukuluchis* – to spite Hitler – just to dance on his grave. Not seeing my Judaism through Dan’s religious lens – or at least not with his sense of certainty and profound faith – for me being Jewish is, indeed, foremost a notion of peoplehood.

“Stating that by choosing not to have kids you’re not contributing to the gene pool – to me, that’s a very non-Jewish approach. Or, at least, not a specifically Jewish approach,” Dan added. Dan’s point is that procreation is the first imperative for *all* of humanity, and not exclusive to Judaism.

“All right, then what makes it un-Jewish not to have kids, in your eyes?” I asked.

“I think a very Jewish approach to life is always optimism and the hope of things getting better, whether on a national level – believing in redemption and the Messiah – or, on a personal

level, in growth and self-development. Judaism has put an incredibly strong emphasis on hope. Despite all the odds, despite all the tragedies, despite all the difficulties. To say 'look how terrible the world is' and to come to the decision not to have kids – that, to me, is un-Jewish. Looking at the world as a mess and saying I am not going to bring anyone into this is un-Jewish because it denies hope. It denies that things can get better, that you can play a part in their getting better. Whereas, Elliot, your answer has nothing to do with Judaism.”