

Sarah:

It was COVID, in the thick of it. Back when we didn't leave our homes. I was secluded at home with my husband and two young children each

My children were young: one just turned five and the other three. It was crazy. My husband and I were working from home and mostly ignoring our children's needs. My five year old learned how to safely remove food from the toaster oven, she knew the alternative would be a long wait for sustenance.

We didn't see friends. We didn't go out. COVID. Around that time, everyone talked about the baby boom that would be and I laughed because even with all of the difficulties of COVID and full time parenting and full time working, I desperately wanted a third child. We had been through so much to make our first two, years of IVF.

Still the internet memes "promised" that people who had children would not be part of the boom. Who wanted to add more chaos to the mix? Mostly we were too tired for sex.

I had just turned 42 and essentially gave up on thoughts of having a third child and just then, exactly then, I got pregnant.

I was a little scared, because the world seemed to be falling apart in front of me. But mostly optimistic because hey, this thing that I'd always wanted, was on his way. My husband and I reveled in the news and smiled at each other and waited as the tests came back. And things looked okay. First actually, we thought we were pregnant with twins. And we were a little relieved to discover that it was only one. Then came the first major test. Ultrasounds looked okay to this point. This was a genetic test to tell us if the fetus was chromosomally sound. I had done this test twice before, no big deal.

Each of my prior pregnancies had been considered geriatric. Think old lady pregnant. My first child was born when I was 37. And my second when I was 39. So of course, I assumed that everything would come back normal. The phone rang and it was my doctor with the test results. He was concerned. He said it didn't look good.

We would need further tests to determine whether the fetus was healthy. I was about 14 weeks pregnant at this point.

All throughout I knew what would happen if the tests came back showing that the fetus was not healthy. My husband and I had had a few conversations about this in the past, each time just confirming we were on the same page. What would we do? We knew, we knew that despite our desire to have children, and love for them and our capacity to love them, we were not able to take care of a child with severe special needs.

We waited and the results came back. It was confirmed: Down syndrome. I thought about it again. We didn't really know what this meant. We didn't know if the fetus would have a fully

developed heart. How much would the kid suffer? Would we be able to take care of this child? I looked at the jungle of my living room with small tiny toys thrown out all over the place and my lack of attention to my current children because COVID. Work and everything else. And I thought about that one time when my then two-year-old daughter nearly pushed over a portable radiator on my newborn son, as I was distracted for just one second. I wondered how we would possibly care for a kid with special needs.

I wondered how this would affect my children as adults. Would it prevent them from following their dreams? If we were too old to care for this child as an adult, would they want to take over?

I thought about a friend who had given birth to a child with Down Syndrome who had severe complications and who lost that child in under two months after birth. I thought about the pain. Then, I went back to the decision that my husband and I had made years ago when we discussed what we would do if this happened. So when my doctor asked if I wanted to continue the pregnancy and I informed him that I wanted to terminate, the rest was almost straightforward, but not easy. And I'm not going to pretend that I don't play "what ifs" in my mind

I was surprised by the support that I received from friends and family when we told them. I expected to be judged. I expected to get looks. I was met with only support, love and "how can I help." I think about him and what our family would have looked like with him at least once a month. Still I know that at the time, it was the only decision that I could have made and I'm grateful that it was my decision to make

Nancy:

Abortion in Israel. So I was dating this guy, I had been her, like, a couple months and I met him right away. And then I was dating him and then I knew right away I mean, I knew after like, a couple of dates I didn't want to go out with him but it didn't know how to end it.

I opened my Facebook and then he saw this picture that my friend had sent me privately. Anyway, it was a picture of me with a guy and he was like, That picture is not on your web photos. It was a picture of us out the night before with a couple of guys we had met at a bar. So my boyfriend sees this and he's like, what's this picture? I've never seen this picture because he scoured all of my photos and he knew everything.

He used to be a personal trainer at a gym. And he had had sex with like over 300 people. He's telling me about it. So I told him, and was like this is before I ever met you. He said, "fucking whore." I'm like, Yes, now I can break out of it. I feel like now he has crossed the line. Thank you. And I told myself as I left the house, "I'm gonna break up," I might I still come back but this is the end, there is no future. It's over. I knew this in my mind but it took some time to act on it. I dragged it out a little more, but that was the moment when I knew it was over. I felt very good. But it took some time and then we did have sex again, though. I was like, sort of felt. I

wasn't really ready to break up with him and so didn't know how to not have sex. I got pregnant that one last time. Then we broke up somewhere in the next couple of weeks.

We had had sex so many times. So I felt like there was something very much like your body knows this is the last time and like that's something. Yeah, because I've heard that story so many times and I was pregnant from that last time.

So what happened because a friend of mine were in town but I went to this local private clinic I had this emergency insurance like what the postdocs get, okay and it's really basic. I didn't even know how to go through that insurance or if the abortion would be covered. I forgot who I asked and they said, you know, there's this private clinic in Tel Aviv so I made an appointment. And it was pretty straightforward.

I remember speaking to somebody on staff once and was told, "you have to speak with a Social worker." She just said, Okay, what are your reasons? And I said this and that I broke up with my boyfriend and that I got pregnant. Okay. And then she just turns to me, she says, I just want to ask you because I see that you're 35 And you've never had a kid. Are you sure that you don't want to have this baby. I told her " I am 100% Sure." That was the end of the conversation

I took the pills when my two good friends were around and there to support me. They knew him they knew he would it wasn't what it actually was they totally supported right decision there was no question nobodyl actually remember I have a picture somewhere of when it came out. Like it was like, as big as a thumbblood clot. And I just put it in the toilet. But I sort of looked at it, took a picture of it, sort of like say goodbye.

Rachel:

We met at a wedding, and then we were dating for like, a month. And I was going to the US for a month and then he was going to Africa with his friend for like three and a half weeks or something. After a couple of weeks we have sex and then I go to the US.

Now I am usually terrible about following my periods. At some point I realized I was pregnant, about a month. I don't remember how we talked about it because we barely knew each other but we were both pretty clear that that we couldn't have this baby together, we had just met and it didn't make sense. I didn't feel bad because I felt like he wasn't "like oh shit, dude. You gotta get rid of that." He was like I'm taking you seriously but this is not something we can do together. Abortion was a reasonable way to do things. So, so we were both, you know, we were like, pretty on board with the abortion.

So I came back to Israel last year living in Tel Aviv went to a private clinic because I wasn't a citizen. They told me not to do physical activity. And that, say the next day or something I was staying in Jerusalem for the weekend and my friend was like you want to go for a walk and so we went. We ended up getting a little bit lost and it was so hot I remember walking and walking for like three hours. And then I went to work the next day and started to have chills and I was sitting it was in my office, and it's August or something. I had the heat on. Someone came into the office and was like, What!? What's wrong with you? We try to find a thermometer. I remember it was kind of funny because we were in a chemistry lab and you would think there's a thermometer. I had a fever and I went home. I don't think I connected it right away, but the guy understood because he had studied medicine.

Though he had already left for Africa, but he had left me with the phone number of his friend, a surgeon. He told me this is his number if there's any problems call him. I called him. He was like, Yeah, hospital. I went to the hospital, and they admitted me and I was in the hospital for like a week. And my health insurance had lapsed exactly at that time. It ended up costing 4,000 shekel. Which is so funny because, you know, what would that look like anywhere else anywhere else?

I'm in the hospital and even though I wasn't having surgery or anything, it was serious and scary. My boyfriend who was in Gambia and he was keeping in touch and being supportive from a distance. We were trying to stay connected, but the connection was choppy. When I tell him that they admitted me to the hospital, he says, "I'm coming back."

It was a formative experience in the beginning of our relationship. Now that we are married with four children. We've referred to it but it was never like a thing that has shaped us.

Chava

I am 48 years old, and I had an abortion 23 years ago.

It was my first real pregnancy, the first pregnancy that took, after a blighted ovum. I don't recall if I had another early miscarriage before this pregnancy too, or if it came after. Regardless, I was only 25, married for almost 3 years, ambivalent about becoming a parent, but going through the motions to make it happen. I was really silly then, and naive, when I had that blighted ovum I had never even seen a pregnancy test. And yet I was trying to get pregnant. And when I did get pregnant, I hadn't even been taking prenatal vitamins. Young, ignorant, and carefree.

Here is what I remember:

In the first trimester, I had bleeding. I rushed to the dr, afraid of a miscarriage. My progesterone was low, so they prescribed these suppositories that I had to buy from a pharmacy in Philadelphia that could compound them. I think that was when I had my first ultrasound too, that confirmed the pregnancy, and the ultrasound technician typed "Hi Mom and Dad" on the printout

I took home. I took the hormones through the first trimester, my levels stabilized, my baby secure.

When the time came, coming up on 12 weeks, my obgyn spoke to me at a regular checkup appointment about a blood test she wanted me to take in order to check for abnormalities. It was the triple screen test. I remember telling her, it didn't matter, that I wouldn't have an abortion anyway. In the end we agreed I should take the test, at least to have advance warning if the fetus should have Down syndrome, so I could learn and prepare.

A few days after I took the test, I got a call from the practice. They said that the part of the test that tested for neural tube defects was high and that they needed me to come in for a level II diagnostic ultrasound. I did not have the courage to ask what high meant. Instead, I read about it on the internet. Maybe it was twins, I learned. Maybe I had the dates wrong for when the pregnancy started. Maybe it would be okay.

I remember the day of the ultrasound, that Michael was with me, I remember part of the exam, the fetus couldn't be imaged the way the dr needed, so he asked if he could apply more pressure, and I answered as long as it doesn't hurt the baby. I remember looking at the screen, like anyone who isn't a radiologist can tell what they are looking at without being told, and I remember wanting to ask - where is the head? And I didn't ask, so I had a few more short minutes of normal life, as normal as life can be when you are having a medical test, when you're scared and you don't know what they will say because they aren't talking. Even pressing harder, he was not able to get see what he was looking for. And he was so sensitive, so polite, so respectful when he asked also for permission to do a vaginal ultrasound, and I said yes.

Then somehow I remember our conversation with the radiologist being in the same room as the ultrasound, and isn't that strange, it feels like it should have been in an office like on tv. According to my husband, we did go to an office.

This was the day I first heard the word anencephaly, a neural tube defect even more unimaginable than spina bifida.

Let me just say here, I don't know when it is best to write baby or fetus - they are both wrong, because to me to call it a fetus is to disregard the care and love and nurturing I was giving my baby with my thoughts and dreams in that first trimester. But, for me, there really was no baby in the end, so maybe fetus is all right

The radiologist said it would hit us like a ton of bricks. He drew us a sketch, of how through the ultrasound, he could see part of the brainstem, and nothing above it. He had to work so hard with the ultrasound because the fetus was facing the wall of the uterus, and he needed to see that the face was like a mask, that there was no skull above it. So he was trying to get the fetus to move, and in the end succeeded with the vaginal probe.

He told us that if the pregnancy were carried to term, the baby if not stillborn would live only for a matter of minutes or hours. That even then, they think it is something in the fetal brain that triggers the maternal body to go into labor, and that in all likelihood labor would have to be induced.

Then he talked about terminating the pregnancy, that I could have a medical abortion, or that I could choose to induce labor and deliver the baby. He advised me that I shouldn't have to put my body through that.

Somehow we finished the appointment and we went home to our apartment. It was a Friday and we had been invited to our upstairs neighbors for Friday night dinner for the Sabbath. We cancelled, and our neighbor sent us food down. At the time when the Sabbath meal would begin, there is a blessing made on wine, and I had been drinking grape juice instead for all the pregnancy. I told my husband to pour me wine instead, because it wouldn't matter. And I couldn't drink it. I wept.

A lot of people debate whether abortion is right or wrong, and under what circumstances it might be more right than wrong. It was not a given that we would have an abortion. We are Jewish, and we are religious, and we went to a rabbi to ask for a decision if we could have an abortion. It would have been bad enough to have to deal with the loss of the baby, there were no good choices here. But to contemplate if I were not able to abort religiously, it was horrific. I could not see walking the streets, going to work -my belly growing, feeling the fetus move, just electrical impulses from the brain stem, to hear people congratulate me. I could not see it.

We went to the rabbi, the most important rabbi we knew of in the area, someone learned and respected. We presented the situation to him, I asked if we terminated, would we name the baby? Would we bury it? He did not give us a decision on the spot.

While we waited for him to answer, we went ahead with scheduling the abortion. The radiologist had been very specific that I did not have a lot of time to decide - in just another two or three weeks, the fetus would be too large for a medical abortion. If I recall correctly, we were told that for anencephaly, it was legal in Pennsylvania to abort even later in the second trimester, but I guess the longer you wait, the more difficult it might be or dangerous. Or hard to stomach ethically.

In the end, the rabbi told us he could not give an answer, but told us he was referring us to a different rabbi who specialized in medical ethics from New York, and he bade us call this rabbi, at a certain hour of night. And the phone was busy endlessly, until the very end of the time when we finally got through, he listened to us for a very short time, and said we could abort, and that was that. I was giddy with relief.

There are brief memories that I can bring up from this time period, like postcards that you can't turn over:

- In the waiting room of the medical office where we went for a second opinion/to schedule the abortion, there was a girl, who seemed so young, a teenager. She was crying. I asked if everything were all right. She said, "it's not good, it's not good at all."
- Talking to the doctor, who I felt had a terrible bedside manner, but maybe I just couldn't hear what little comfort he could offer me, My mother-in-law said that I didn't need a great bedside manner, but I needed a good doctor. And she was right, of course.
 - He told me how rare anencephaly is. I said, bitterly, "I guess I must be lucky." He said, "No, when everything comes together right for a healthy baby, those are the people who are truly lucky."
 - He explained to me what would be involved in the procedure, that I would be having an extended dilation and extraction (D & E, as opposed to the D & C that describes a simple scraping of the walls of the uterus), that I would come in the day before to have seaweed rods put in my cervix, that he would use tools he had developed to cut the fetus, and remove it in pieces from my body, That there would be nothing I would want to see afterward.
 - He talked to us about people who went on afterward to have children and were happy. I didn't want to hear it.
- We went to New Orleans for a wedding of a good friend of my husband's.
 - I borrowed my sister-in-law's prom dress, a beautiful sparkly a line dress with no waistline so that I would not have to wear a maternity dress.
 - When we went to where the bride was sitting with her family, her mother or her mother-in-law-to-be said to me, "There aren't words."
 - We were due to fly back the night before the first appointment to start the abortion. To my horror, our flight was delayed by several hours. And I was left wondering what would happen if I could not make that appointment.
- Before we could start the abortion, we had to sign paperwork in the office. The bitterness filled my heart as I was forced to sign that I understood that
 - Financial help could be available to me, if I did not abort.
 - Adoption was an option to consider, instead of abortion.

When my first real pregnancy ended, on May 31, 2000, I was under general anesthesia. Afterwards, I accepted a lovely basket of plants, a miniature garden from my husband or my mother-in-law, who I think purchased it from the hospital gift shop. I waited outside the hospital

with one of them waiting for the car to be brought around. We went home, or maybe we went back to my in-laws house, just outside Philadelphia.

In two short days, I suffered a further indignity. My milk came in, and my breasts were rock solid from armpit to armpit. I was in agony. I don't know if I was offered any medication to prevent the milk from coming in, but I think not. I think I asked them why they didn't tell me, and I received some nothing answer about how there was so much information to get through, that it didn't often happen.

I remember leaking through my clothes in subsequent days, and I didn't even know that nursing pads existed. I had a day where I cramped badly, and when I went to the bathroom, I expelled some spongy tissue that had been left behind.

They tested the fetus for genetic abnormalities, but didn't find anything. So it was just one of those things, and I would have a 1 in 200 chance of having a repeat neural tube defect in a subsequent pregnancy, so I needed to make sure to take 4 mg of folic acid a day, starting a month or so before becoming pregnant, so really that meant that when we were to start trying again, I would need to take 4 mg of folic acid, every day, through the first trimester. And all this meant that each pregnancy would be a high risk pregnancy, at least at the start.

And from then our life was different:

- I went from wanting to do what was right religiously and try to get pregnant, to actually wanting to have a baby and to be a parent.
- We were in the process of deciding whether to move closer to my in-laws or move to a community nearby, but too far for easy help from family. We chose to move four blocks away from my in-laws.
- In the synagogue there were two other young women, both due around the time I would have been due. I watched their pregnancies progress. When I overheard one of them saying she hadn't done testing, because it didn't matter, I thought to myself how foolish she was.
- With each of the pregnancies for my three children, I was robbed of the easy joy of discovering I was pregnant. I had many more ultrasounds. And I worried.
- The expression "it was a no-brainer" has taken on different significance, having been confronted with my own very literal no-brain decision.

For a long time afterward, I fluttered in news groups on the internet, searching and searching for why this had happened. I challenged a man I found online who had written how Jewish law forbids abortion, and I asked him to tell me what could be the basis then for having an abortion for anencephaly. He seemed uncomfortable, probably realizing that I was coming from a place of hurt, and he suggested that because the neshama, the soul, is said to reside in the brain, that with no brain, there is no soul. I did not find comfort, and I was still hungry for an answer.

After many years, I came to an answer. When my son was born, he was born less than a year after the original due date of my first pregnancy. If I had not had an abortion, he would never have existed. Each time I tried to get pregnant, it took me at least six months. And if the anencephaly had not occurred, and the first pregnancy had been whole and healthy, he also would never have been born. So I think the real reason all this happened is because the world needed my Yaakov, and it needed me to want to be his mother.

If I ask myself, and I answer honestly, I regret having the surgical abortion rather than inducing labor. I never saw my first, dearly wanted baby. I don't know if it was a boy or a girl. It is more amorphous, less human, and maybe that was the point all along. If I had held my tiny baby in my arms, maybe I would feel the complete opposite, that these images were now seared into my memory, and I could never unsee them. And here is my deep dark secret, my superstition. I have three children, and they were all delivered by cesarean section. And some part of my brain, cut free from logic and reason, feels that it was a divine judgment, that I did not labor with my first, so I would never labor and birth naturally. I have said it, and it is still there inside me, a deep ache.

For practical reasons, I was thrilled with my first cesarean. Let me explain, I didn't want to talk about my abortion, to explain my choices to anyone. For the religious Jew, the first born male has a special status, and he would have been destined for temple service way back when. So one of the things that people do is have a ceremony called a pidyan haben at the age of one month, where the child is redeemed from this obligation. This is only for the first pregnancy, and only if the child were born naturally. Because my first pregnancy was longer than 40 days after conception, my first child (from my second pregnancy) was not eligible to be redeemed. When he was not delivered naturally, it gave a plausible explanation to any curious and well-meaning bystanders why we were not having a pidyan haben, without needing to explain our first pregnancy.

In the end, this is a story of tragedy, and a story of loss, and a situation that would never have turned out the way I wanted at that time, no matter what I chose to do. Everyone responds differently to loss. I spoke with someone who felt that for me to be sad for myself was selfish, that it made sense to mourn the lost life, the child it wasn't, but what it could have been. I don't think you can tell someone how to mourn.

When you have had a pregnancy loss, and others hear of it, they come out of the woodwork to share their stories. I remember one of my mother-in-law's friends sharing with me earnestly how she had a baby lost in the ninth month, that the umbilical cord was tied up like a balloon animal, that the doctor had never seen anything like it before. I don't think women ever completely recover, and I am not sure I can tell you what I think recovery would look like. I think people learn to live despite the pain, and I hope that I have been successful in doing so.

Abortion is one of those taboo topics, and it was suggested to me early on by a loved one that I could just answer that the pregnancy ended early, and that would be enough. Maybe it is a matter of old habits, but it is hard to think how to just up and tell someone, hey, I was thinking about my first pregnancy that ended in an abortion, that all things being equal I didn't want, and I

am feeling melancholy. Abortion doesn't just come up in idle conversation. I don't want to be judged by what I chose, because in the end it is really nobody else's business. But I am left in a lonely place, and most of the time it feels like I have moved past it, but it must be more central to who I am, because when I stop and think about it, it hurts.