

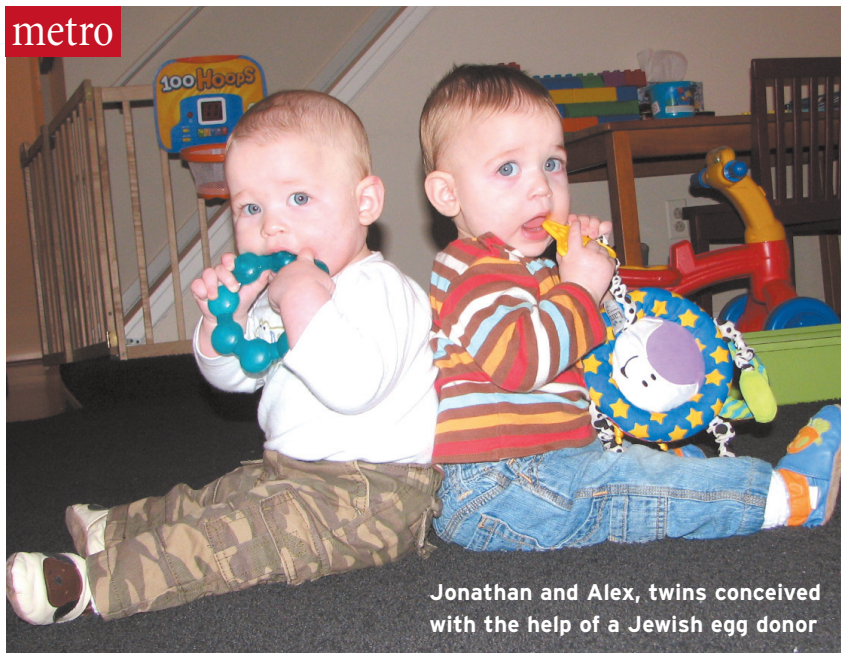
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Jonathan and Alex, twins conceived with the help of a Jewish egg donor

Frozen Assets

New egg-freezing technology assists infertile couples at Michigan Egg Bank.

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JN Contributing Writer

It didn't come wrapped in festive paper or tied with a fancy bow. In fact, the greatest gift a Huntington Woods couple in their 40s ever received is not even visible to the human eye. Suzanne and her husband, Sam, who requested their last name not be used, have an anonymous Jewish egg donor to thank for helping create their twin sons, Jonathan and Alex, now 5.

The couple traveled to New York City and selected the donor from an agency when other infertility treatments were unsuccessful. Suzanne has polycystic ovarian syndrome, a common hormonal disorder that can cause cysts on the ovaries and difficulty becoming pregnant. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in eight couples — more than 7 million people — will have trouble conceiving a child.

"I wanted to find [a donor] I could relate to and that's why we went to a Jewish agency," Suzanne recalls. "At first, I was looking for someone who looked like me. But then we printed the profiles of all the potential donors and I saw one and said, 'I love this girl.' I liked the way she answered the questions about her favorite holiday, favorite childhood memories and the things that were important to her. She looked nothing like me, but she was available when we were available and we decided to do it."

The couple has the young woman's photo and her medical history, but they only know her first name. The donor had to pass health and psychological screenings, give herself about a dozen shots of fertility drugs, and undergo a minor surgical procedure to harvest and remove her eggs. Then, medical

technologists (known as embryologists) combined the eggs with Sam's sperm to create embryos. Those embryos were implanted, and Suzanne became pregnant on the first try. She carried and delivered the twins who were born in 2007. The procedure and donor fee cost the couple thousands of dollars.

"Before we tried this, we went through multiple miscarriages and other failed procedures," Suzanne said. "I'm eternally grateful to our donor. I wish she could see the boys because they're so beautiful and I'm so proud to be their mom. I wish she could know what she helped to create."

Frozen Eggs

Suzanne and Sam are patients of Dr. Michael Mersol-Barg, a (Jewish) reproductive endocrinologist who serves as Medical and Laboratory Director at the Birmingham-based Center



Dr. Michael Mersol-Barg

for Reproductive Medicine & Surgery. He's also the founder of the Michigan Egg Bank. The facility, established in 2008, is the only egg bank in Michigan and one of only a handful in the country that stores donor eggs.

While Suzanne and Sam used "fresh" eggs for their procedure, the egg bank also offers frozen eggs, a relatively new option. Lab technicians use liquid nitrogen to freeze the microscopic eggs at -300 degrees or more. They can be stored for several years. When a patient is ready to use them, they're thawed, fertilized and implanted.

"This is revolutionary. This is a game changer," Mersol-Barg says. "As much as

no one likes to be told what to do and when to have children, biology is ruthless on this for women.”

While embryo freezing has been available since 1985, reliable egg freezing has only emerged in recent years. Because human eggs are extremely fragile, it's taken a long time to develop a technique that works. The first baby born from a frozen egg in Michigan (a boy) came into the world in July 2010 through Mersol-Barg's program. Only about 3,000 babies have been born from frozen eggs worldwide.

“Transfer of any one embryo leads to a 45 percent chance of pregnancy; transfer of two embryos leads to a 62 percent chance of pregnancy. This is the same as we observe with fresh donor eggs,” Mersol-Barg says. “The cost of frozen donor egg IVF (in vitro fertilization) is half that of a fresh donor egg. It's about \$5,500 plus the purchase of the eggs, and it's a much easier and shorter process.”

Since the Michigan Egg Bank opened, he says 32 of the first 50 frozen egg patients have become pregnant. Twenty-four babies have been delivered, and there are seven ongoing pregnancies. One patient suffered a miscarriage.

“The Michigan Egg Bank is the only place in our state from which women have delivered babies from fertilized frozen eggs,” Mersol-Barg says. “I truly believe egg freezing is the future.”

Women can also use the technology to preserve their own fertility by freezing eggs before cancer treatment or having their “young” eggs frozen to be used later in life when they're ready to start a family. Egg freezing for fertility preservation costs about \$3,500; egg freezing for cancer patients is about \$2,900. Mersol-Barg says these choices offer women hope of having children when it might otherwise not have been possible.

“I want to make a positive difference in people's lives,” he says. “With egg freezing, women can preserve their fertility, and with the egg bank, infertile women can have a child. As a reproductive endocrinologist, I'm very excited about the future with egg freezing. The technology is working.”

Jewish Egg Donors Wanted

As Suzanne and Sam found out several years ago, finding a Jewish egg donor can be difficult; the same is true today. Many local couples looking for Jewish donors travel out of state. One Manhattan-based agency, New York Life Spring, founded by an Israeli woman, uses Israeli women exclusively. But, the demand for donors often exceeds the supply.

“It's hard to find a Jewish donor locally, and sometimes it's ridiculous in big cities because the agencies are charging an arm and a leg,” Suzanne says. “I'm hoping that spreading the

word about this might help someone make the decision to donate.”

At the Michigan Egg Bank, donors must be 18-30 years old, in good health and have no family history of genetic disorders through three generations. They're also required to provide a personal health history, undergo tests to show their eggs are of good quality, participate in unannounced drug testing and pass a psychological assessment. Donors are paid \$3,000-\$5,000 regardless of how many eggs are donated.

“Humanitarian motivation is the ‘why’ for women who choose to help other women by donating their eggs,” Mersol-Barg says. “Women who choose to donate have a deep wish to help other women struggling to have children. Many of our egg donors know a family member or friend struggling with infertility due to poor egg quality. Their lives have been touched by this tragedy and they feel a calling to help.”

Rabbi Elimelech Silberberg, rabbi of the Sara Taugman Bais Chabad Torah Center of West Bloomfield, says while this modern issue is not addressed in the Talmud, most religious authorities will give their blessing to women using a donated egg to conceive.

“If the host mother is Jewish, the child is Jewish and no conversion would be needed,” he said. “It's very painful for people who want to have children not to be able to have children. It's not an obligation, but it's a human need.”

Mersol-Barg says while there are risks involved with any medical procedure, donating eggs does not hurt the donor's future fertility.

“There's a lack of awareness for needing Jewish egg donors,” he says. “I am always available to talk to groups at the Jewish Community Center, synagogues, luncheons, whatever it takes. There needs to be sustained energy for this cause and leaders championing this need.” □



Embryo biopsy

For more information about the Michigan Egg Bank or donating eggs, call Dr. Mersol-Barg at (248) 593-6990, go to www.reproductive-medicine.com.



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