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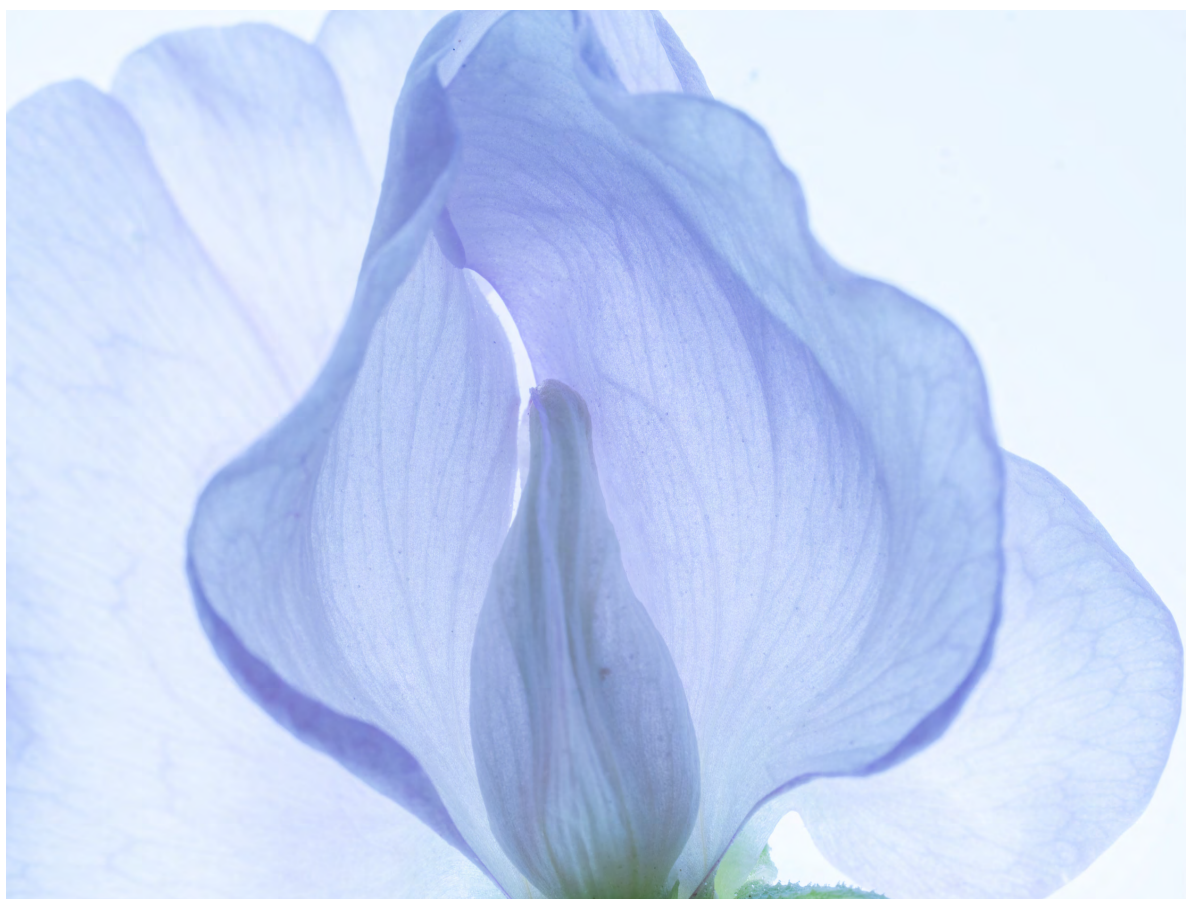
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From Sarah to Rebecca to Bubbie to You:

Empowering Modern Jewish Lives by Embracing
Ancient Ancestral Birthing and Postpartum Wisdom



Written by Anna Calamaro

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Capstone Advisor: Dr. Kristine Garroway

Graphic Design by Yael Farber

Abstract

Pregnancy, birth, and postpartum should not merely be physiological stages of life to be endured. Rather, it could be a spiritually meaningful time in a birther's life that holds countless opportunities to connect, reconnect, and enhance one's relationship with one's ancestors, with Jewish community and identity, and with the Divine. When a birther goes for an ultrasound, the doctors check for the health and well-being of the baby. But what might a spiritual ultrasound look like? How did our matriarchs in Ancient Israel determine the health of their babies in utero without such equipment? When a pregnant person feels their baby kick for the first time, it can be a moment of overwhelming celebration that doctors may later use as a barometer for the wellness of the baby. But what rituals are in place to celebrate the feeling of those first kicks? The first time a birther holds their baby? The first shower postpartum? The first "I don't know if I can do this" moment postpartum? Both our ancient tradition and our ever-evolving Jewish customs hold more answers to these questions than we may think, and it does not get talked about nearly as much as it should.

Proverbs 1:8 advises: "Heed, my son, the discipline of your father and do not abandon the Torah of your mother." In the world of birth, many have unknowingly forgotten the Torah of their mothers in that the intergenerational chain of birthing wisdom has been broken somewhere along our *L'Dor V'Dor* transmissions. I scoured Jewish tradition to find the prayers, customs, and rituals that our foremothers passed to their daughters and granddaughters. And while it's true that our matriarch Sarah would have no idea how to administer an epidural, and Miriam may not have known about umbilical cord tissue banking, our foremothers held rich spiritual birth wisdom that we have lost connection to today, and which would deeply enhance Jewish women's experience of birth from conception to postpartum. From Sarah to Rebecca to Bubbie to You: Empowering Modern Jewish Lives by Embracing Ancient Ancestral Birthing and Postpartum Wisdom dares to reignite the ancient birthing and postpartum wisdom that was once passed down from generation to generation by bringing it into modernity in an accessible, spiritually significant workbook for Jewish birthers.

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This workbook is dedicated to our beautiful son, Solomon Balev. You were delivered by gentle hands in a hospital delivery room filled with respect, dignity, Jewish ritual, and deep love. May the people who explore the pages of this workbook be blessed with that same level of respect, connection, and empowerment before, during, and after their birth experiences.

"Peace on Earth Begins with Birth" -Jeannine Pavarti Baker

Introduction

I. Why this topic is important in our world

The idea that childbirth and postpartum can be a positive, meaningful experience is usually foreign to Westerners. Particularly for Americans, most believe that prehospital births were fraught with peril and that modern medical assistance is critical to every delivery and recovery. Sometimes, this is true. Modern medicine has made incredible advancements that have not only saved the lives of women and babies, but have also made pregnancy possible for women who cannot otherwise conceive naturally. So while sometimes pregnancy, birth, and postpartum necessitate special medications and complicated techniques, it need not be consistently viewed as a period of crisis through which a medical framing is the only lens. While the medicalization of birth can and does save lives, the way our society views the process of pregnancy and postpartum sometimes leans entirely on the medical aspects and neglects other important factors that contribute to healthy pregnancies and births, namely the spiritual component. What would society look like if it were to hold the spirituality of birth to just as high a degree as the medicalization of birth?

Owing to a perfect marriage of scientific development and misogyny, women have been unknowingly separated from ancestral wisdom and the celebration of the Divine feminine in birth. Childbirth has not always been considered a solely physical endeavor. It is only when we explore what birth looked like before its modern medicalization that we can begin to reconnect with the emotional, spiritual, and communal significance this major life event deserves.

Pregnancy, birth, and postpartum should not merely be physiological stages of life to be endured. Rather, it could be a spiritually meaningful time in a birther's life that holds countless opportunities to connect, reconnect, and enhance one's relationship with one's ancestors, with Jewish community and identity, and with the Divine. When a birther goes for an ultrasound, the doctors check for the health and well-being of the baby. But what might a spiritual ultrasound look like? How did our matriarchs in Ancient Israel determine the health of their babies in utero without such equipment? When a pregnant person feels their baby kick for the first time, it can be a moment of overwhelming celebration that doctors may later use as a barometer for the wellness of the baby. But what rituals are in place to celebrate the feeling of those first kicks? The first time a birther holds their baby? The first shower postpartum? The first "I don't know if I can do this" moment postpartum? Both our ancient tradition and our ever-evolving Jewish customs hold more answers to these questions than we may think, and it does not get talked about nearly as much as it should.

Other than Brit Milah, many Jews today do not connect spiritually or religiously to the process of pregnancy, birth, and postpartum. This is a great loss, as throughout the ages, the Jewish people have continuously developed birth traditions, rituals, and customs handed down from generation to generation or within particular communities. It is time we pick up where we left off and continue building this incredibly powerful chain of generational wisdom and communal support around birth that empowers Jewish birthers while strengthening Jewish communities.



Because the Talmudic Rabbis who formulated the basis of traditional Jewish ritual and law were non-birthing people, they never experienced pregnancy. This accounts for, in part, the dearth of prayers and rituals around birth and postpartum. If the Rabbis had been women, we would likely have an entire series of holy texts devoted to such practices. This is not to say that the Rabbis found pregnancy and birth to be insignificant. In their eyes, family issues simply were not classified as spiritual issues. However, simply because the rabbis did not write such rituals into law does not mean they never existed. We just need to dig deeper. This workbook plunges into these cobwebbed depths.

Proverbs 1:8 advises us שְׁמַע בְּנִי מוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ וְאַל-תִּטֵּשׁ תּוֹרַת אִמְךָ: “Heed, my son, the discipline of your father and do not abandon the Torah of your mother.” In the world of birth, many have unknowingly forgotten the Torah of their mothers in that the intergenerational chain of birthing wisdom has been broken somewhere along our *L’Dor V’Dor* transmissions. I scoured Jewish tradition to find the prayers, customs, and rituals that our foremothers passed to their daughters and granddaughters. And while it’s true that our matriarch Sarah would have no idea how to administer an epidural, and Miriam may not have known about umbilical cord tissue banking, our foremothers held rich spiritual birth wisdom that we have lost connection to today, and which would deeply enhance Jewish women’s experience of birth from conception to postpartum. From Sarah to Rebecca to Bubbie to You: Empowering Modern Jewish Lives by Embracing Ancient Ancestral Birthing and Postpartum Wisdom dares to reignite the ancient birthing and postpartum wisdom that was once passed down from generation to generation by bringing it into modernity in an accessible, spiritually significant workbook for Jewish birthers.

II. Who I am and why this topic is personally important to me

Welcome to your Jewish pregnancy and postpartum workbook! My name is Anna Calamaro. I am a DONA International certified birth and postpartum doula and soon to be ordained Rabbi through the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion. You may think that being a Rabbi and being a doula are opposites—one deals with the soul while the other deals with the physical body. However, I believe pregnancy encompasses the body AND the soul. Pregnancy does not need to be just a physical condition to be endured; rather, it has the potential to be a spiritually meaningful and memorable phase in your life.

When I was 8 years old, my parents gifted me a beautiful book called “Happy Birthday” by Robie H. Harris and illustrations by Michael Emberley. Its detailed childbirth illustrations left little to the imagination, instantly answering all of my questions about where babies came from, while simultaneously horrifying me. Babies come from there?! How embarrassing! I hid the book on my shelf and vowed to never look at those scarring images again. Somewhere in my high school days, I found myself revisiting that book with renewed curiosity. This led to one of all time favorite activities: binging birth videos on YouTube. To this day, when I want to relax and unwind and infuse some gratitude and spirituality into my evening, I click on my birth channel. I marvel at the miracle of birth. After reading Anita Diamant’s, *The Red Tent*, the ancestral strength and wisdom of women giving birth and assisting the birthing process further awakened something within me. After speaking with several other rabbis and Jewish communal professionals about birth work, I realized that I wanted birth work to be at the core of my rabbinate.



I draw strength, wisdom, and guidance from the Jewish tradition transmitting to my clients the knowledge and rituals our ancestors shared. There are so many matters to manage during pregnancy: eating healthy, getting plenty of rest and exercise, and diving into a sea of pregnancy books and classes. All are important preparations for baby, but we should not neglect the spiritual and emotional preparation of the birther! As more and more of my Jewish friends began having babies, I heard the same complaint over and over: there are so many ceremonies, rituals, and guidelines for just about every life cycle event in Judaism. But why is there so little around pregnancy and birth? Save for *Brit Milah*, most of my friends felt completely disconnected from spirituality and Jewish community during their pregnancies and postpartum experiences. This not only does not need to be the case, but it is counter to how our matriarchs intended this powerful life event to unfold. As you dive into these pages, it is my hope that you feel the ancient strings of our ancestors, or even just our great grandparents, reconnecting to your Jewish *neshama* (“soul”), and reminding you that as you create and bring life into this world, you are anything but alone.

III. How to best utilize this workbook

Each chapter of this workbook begins with a relevant quote that will invite you into a Jewish text. Following the quote, you will see a variety of subsections on the specified topic, always concluding with a space for you to brainstorm, reflect, absorb, and sit with the teachings from the chapter. I encourage you to take these reflection sections to heart, taking your time on each and thoughtfully connecting with the material in a way that speaks to you in that moment. If you choose not to write inside the workbook, consider using a separate journal or notebook to diary your thoughts and impressions. I promise, if you use the reflection spaces wisely, your birth and/or postpartum experience will not only be enhanced for yourself, but also for your partner, your baby, and the community of support surrounding you.

IV. Concerning the clinical advice in this workbook

I have tried to minimize the clinical information within this workbook, as it cannot and should not be used as a substitute for consulting your physician or midwife. It is essential that you follow the advice of your care team and receive whatever treatments or follow whatever instructions they deem as necessary for your pregnancy and the birth of a healthy baby. Each pregnancy requires individualized attention and tailoring. No book, regardless of its degree of professionalism or accuracy, can replace that. This workbook should be used as a spiritual guide to your pregnancy and postpartum experiences, and not as a medical index.



V. God-speak and Gendering God throughout this workbook

You will notice that I will use the Divine feminine when referring to God throughout this workbook. This is not, in fact, because I believe God to be a woman. My personal belief is that the human vocabulary and mind are insufficient when it comes to addressing God with words, so no particular pronoun or gender or name for God can be any more accurate than the next. However, in our patriarchal society today, God is most commonly referred to as “He/Him” in our proverbial speech. In order to keep the Divine feminine ever present throughout these pages and to push back against the common, automatic assumption of God as a man, you will encounter God as “She/Her.” You will also notice multiple names for God used throughout this workbook. Here are brief explanations of each name, along with some additional alternative names for God:

The Divine

A non-gendered name for God in English

The Divine Feminine

See “Shekhinah” below. Also a phrase signifying the feminine attributes and energies of God

Shekhinah

The feminine attribute of God, representing the presence of God dwelling among all of us

El Shaddai

“God Almighty” or “The God of Breasts,” often used in the contexts of fertility in the Torah

Ruach Elohim

“Spirit of God,” with allusion to a mother eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11)

Elohim

Referred to in plural Hebrew, so as to encompass all genders

El Roi

“The one who sees.” This was the name that Hagar gave to God as she was exiled from Abraham’s house into the wilderness. Hagar was the only woman in the Torah to have the privilege of directly giving God a name.

Ein Sof

“Endless” or “Infinite One,” from Kabbalah

HaMakom

“The place,” also used to refer to the vagina

VI. Gendered Birth Language in this workbook

Birthing people come in all shapes, colors, and gender identities. In the spirit of inclusivity, you will notice a variety of language used throughout this workbook to describe birthers. Throughout these pages, you will encounter them as: women, men, pregnant people, birthers, mothers, parents, and other relevant names. I have intentionally included this wide variety of identities and names. Whether you yourself identify as a pregnant woman or a pregnant non-binary person or anything between, it is important to remember that no identity is any more correct than the next. Our differences strengthen each other and create a powerful, diverse mosaic of pregnancy, parenthood, and personhood that enrich all of our experiences in this world.



VII. What's spirituality got to do with it? Connecting the womb to the Divine

A Parable of Life After Delivery from "Your Sacred Self" by Wayne W. Dyer

In a mother's womb were two babies. One asked the other: "Do you believe in life after delivery?" The other replied, "Why, of course. There has to be something after delivery. Maybe we are here to prepare ourselves for what we will be later."

"Nonsense" said the first. "There is no life after delivery. What kind of life would that be?"

The second said, "I don't know, but there will be more light than here. Maybe we will walk with our legs and eat from our mouths. Maybe we will have other senses that we can't understand now."

The first replied, "That is absurd. Walking is impossible. And eating with our mouths? Ridiculous! The umbilical cord supplies nutrition and everything we need. But the umbilical cord is so short. Life after delivery is to be logically excluded."

The second insisted, "Well I think there is something and maybe it's different than it is here. Maybe we won't need this physical cord anymore."

The first replied, "Nonsense. And moreover if there is life, then why has no one has ever come back from there? Delivery is the end of life, and in the after-delivery there is nothing but darkness and silence and oblivion. It takes us nowhere."

"Well, I don't know," said the second, "but certainly we will meet Mother and she will take care of us." The first replied "Mother? You actually believe in Mother? That's laughable. If Mother exists then where is She now?"

The second said, "She is all around us. We are surrounded by her. We are of Her. It is in Her that we live. Without Her this world would not and could not exist."

Said the first: "Well I don't see Her, so it is only logical that She doesn't exist."

To which the second replied, "Sometimes, when you're in silence and you focus and you really listen, you can perceive Her presence, and you can hear Her loving voice, calling down from above."



Chapter 1

Passing Down Birth Stories: Our Matriarchs and Their Pregnancies



וְאַל-תִּשָּׁחַק תּוֹרַת אִמֶּךָ

*“Do Not Abandon The
Torah Of Your Mother”*

Proverbs 1:8

I. Sarah

Sarah, born “Sarai,” is thought to be the first matriarch of our people. In many ways, she has become a symbol of motherhood for the entire world, as it said that she drew others “near to the bosom” of Judaism. However, this title did not come easily to our first matriarch as she struggled with infertility for nearly the entirety of her lifespan. She is included as one of seven barren women we read about in our holy texts. Moreover, Sarah is the first woman we learn of who uses a sort of surrogacy method to grow her family. That surrogate’s name was Hagar, and she slept with Sarah’s husband, Abraham, to conceive Ishmael. Now this may sound very Handmaid’s Tale-like, but this is an extremely common practice in ancient times, especially within barren marriages. Midrashic accounts tell us that Hagar conceived immediately, while Sarah could not conceive for over a decade. Many of us know this feeling: one moment we are throwing out yet another negative pregnancy test, and the next we are scrolling social media seeing someone posting yet another pregnancy announcement. Conception, or lack thereof, can be so deeply painful. Sarah’s story, and her tense relationship with Hagar, reminds us we are not alone in our pain of wanting, but not yet having. **When was a time in your life that you felt the pain, jealousy, or powerlessness of Sarah? Have you felt that during this pregnancy?**

II. Rebekah

Rebekah is known as the second matriarch in our Genesis stories. Rebekah is married to Abraham and Sarah’s son, Isaac, and experiences infertility for twenty years of their marriage. Isaac prays to God on Rebekah’s behalf, and God sees to Rebekah’s conception. Perhaps what is most powerful about Rebekah’s conception and birth journey is that while she is pregnant, God speaks directly to her, proclaiming that there are “two nations” in her womb that will contend with each other (Genesis 25:23). This prophetic moment foreshadows the drama that will characterize the relationship between Rebekah’s two sons, Esau and Jacob. But tension aside, Rebekah’s pregnancy reminds us of the power and close connection we have to God as we partner with Her in creation. After all, even though Isaac prayed on Rebekah’s behalf, God chose to share her prophecy solely with Rebekah when she was pregnant. **What messages, dreams, or divine experiences might be reaching out to you during your pregnancy?**



III. Rachel & Leah

Our patriarch Jacob had four wives: Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah (though Bilhah and Zilpah were viewed more so as handmaidens). Midrash and Aggadah teach us that Rachel was Jacob's favorite wife, despite her 14 year stretch of infertility in the face of Leah's seemingly super-fertility. In the words of my beloved grandmother when reflecting on her own pregnancies: "All I had to do was look in your grandfather's direction, and I'd get pregnant!" Like Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah's relationship was fraught with jealousy and tension because of this spousal fertility power imbalance. But, eventually God "remembered Rachel and opened her womb" (Genesis 30:22) and she bore her first son, Joseph. After the birth, Rachel explained that God "took away her disgrace" (Genesis 30:23). From these words from her lips, the ancient sages teach that once a woman gives birth, she is essentially blameless. No fault can be placed on her (*Tanhuma* [ed. Buber], *Vayeze* 19). For Rachel, becoming a mother began a new chapter of her life, one where she felt more confident and empowered than she ever had. **What feelings do you anticipate experiencing as you either transition into motherhood or add another child to your family?**

Leah, our super-fertile baby maker, (though even Leah experienced secondary infertility later in her baby making years) had six sons and one daughter. Midrash tells us that each of Leah's pregnancies lasted only seven months! Additionally, aside from Benjamin, all her children were conceived within seven years (*Seder Olam Rabbah*). Seven, of course, is a holy number in Judaism, as it mimics the days of creation. **Have you seen the number seven appear in your pregnancy, past or present?** Leah is also known for being a superb name-giver. The names she chooses for each of her children are prophetic in that they tend to foreshadow the futures of each child. For more information on the power of names in Jewish tradition, see chapter 7.



IV. Hannah

Hannah is an extremely important matriarch in our tradition. And she also struggled with.. you guessed it... infertility. Her story can be found in 1 Samuel 1-2, where we first meet her as the second (yet favorite) wife of Elkanah. For a little while, Hannah suffers from her barrenness in silence until she decides to go to a temple and pray to God with every fiber of her being. In fact, she prays so fervently that she appears to the temple priest to look like a drunkard. In her prayers, she promises that she will dedicate her child to God if she will allow Hannah to become pregnant. God eventually grants Hannah's wishes, and she gives birth to Samuel. Feminist critiques of the bible adore Hannah. Not once during her infertility struggles does she doubt her capacity for motherhood. Many interpreters of Hannah's story believe that her desire to have a son was not solely tied to personal longing but also to establish her role and position within the community. Having a child was, and still is today, an identity transformation. Once you become a parent, the way you view yourself and the way others view you tends to change. **How do you think your role within your family, friends, work, and community might change once you have a child or multiple children?**

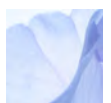
Another fascinating piece of Hannah's journey into motherhood is how she manages her postpartum period. During the time of the pilgrimage to a major shrine called Shiloh, Hannah chooses to remain at home with baby Samuel until he is old enough to be weaned (1 Samuel 1:21). In other words, she listens to the needs of her body and her child and prioritizes them, even if that means missing out on participating in a community event. Hannah's decision to stay home was completely normal for nursing mothers in the ancient world. Hannah also initiates a conversation with Elkanah regarding the conditions with which she will resume travel again, and Elkanah- struck by Hannah's strength and self-assurance- simply validates her words and agrees. Hannah models for us self-care during postpartum in a fearless, powerful fashion. May we all have the courage to listen to our needs, even if others pressure us to jump back into things too quickly.



V. Manoah's Wife

Similarly to Rebekah's direct communication with God, asking for a child, Manoah's wife also has a divine interaction. While it is painful that Manoah's wife does not receive a name in the bible, she does play a powerful role in our people's story. Didn't think Jews believe in angels? You better believe we do! Manoah's wife is confronted by an angel of God... not once, but twice... who brings news that she will conceive a son, Samson, and that he would become a deliverer of Israel. This reminds us, yet again, of the holiness of conception and pregnancy that exists within us in relationship to HaShem. Our souls become elevated and perhaps closer to the Divine than any other time in our conscious lives. The angel also warned Manoah's wife to avoid consuming certain foods, namely any fruit of the vine, while pregnant with Samson. The rabbis, of course, like to interpret this as tactful foreshadowing on the Torah's part, as wine (and the lascivious activity that frequently accompanies alcohol indulgence) would eventually become Samson's downfall. But what else might be going on here?

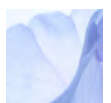
The angel is, perhaps, teaching Manoah's wife about caring for her body while it grows a human soul. Like any good recipe, knowing which ingredients will enhance a recipe and which will lead to its ruin is a key culinary skill. Manoah's wife is able to grow a powerful leader of Israel within her womb because she is mindful of what her body intakes during pregnancy. **What smells, places, foods, tasks, and maybe even people or environments, do your instincts tell you to avoid during pregnancy?** Like Manoah's wife, may you have the strength to listen to those holy gut impulses.



VI. Pinchas' Wife

Pinchas' Wife, another unnamed woman in our holy text, brings with her a story of sadness and grief. Pinchas' wife, just moments before she gives birth to a son, is informed that both her husband, brother-in-law, and father-in-law have all died in battle and that the enemy stole the holy ark containing the Torah. The Torah tells us that 30,000 men were slaughtered in this bloody battle. The Torah ark had been a source of strength for the Jewish army, as it was a dwelling place for the Divine. The midwives tried to comfort Pinchas' Wife, but she was inconsolable. As a result, Pinchas' wife named her son "Ichabod," meaning "where is the glory?" Pinchas' wife, stricken with the deepest grief, died shortly after giving birth. Her last words were "The glory is departed from Israel; for the ark of God is taken" (I Samuel 4: 21-22).

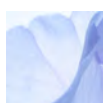
While the loss of her family no doubt causes personal pain, Pinchas' wife reserves her deepest anguish for what their loss means to the Jewish people. The loss of the ark of the Torah is just as great a death, if not greater, than the loss of her family members. Her husband, brother-in-law, and father-in-law were all transmitters of Torah and ancestral wisdom that her son will never know. The name "Ichabod" elegizes them on this level. **Who were meaningful people in your life who your child will never have the opportunity to meet? What are the ways you can pass on their wisdom, passions, and essence to your child? How might your child's life honor and reinvigorate their memories? And perhaps most importantly... what or who are YOU still mourning and how might that manifest in your parenting behavior?**



VII. Shiphrah & Puah

These two incredible women are two of my personal favorites. Shiphrah and Puah were midwives for the Jewish people in Egypt where they lived in captivity. In the Exodus story, Pharaoh commands Shiphrah and Puah to kill every Jewish baby boy upon delivery in an effort to enact population control among the Israelites whose numbers had grown exponentially. The women agreed (after all... you don't say no to Pharaoh) and secretly prevented, temporarily, this horrific genocide behind Pharaoh's back. Eventually, Pharaoh noticed that the women had not kept their word. Upon asking why they had not killed the baby boys, they replied "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth" (Exodus 1:19).

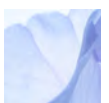
Of course, we know the rest of the story. Pharaoh took things into his own hands after hearing how the midwives had disobeyed, and he instructed his army to throw every newborn baby boy into the Nile. However, the midwives saved a great unknown number of lives. They used their power to delay the genocide as long as humanly possible... and it worked. God rewarded the midwives and as a result, the Jewish people multiplied and increased greatly (Exodus 1:20). The midwives' noble act of civil disobedience is inspiring and brave and reminds us that even in moments when we feel powerless, we still hold a great deal of power. Labor and delivery can make us feel extremely vulnerable and sometimes helpless. Shiphrah and Puah teach us to realize our own strength and even when we feel weak or unsure or frightened, to vocalize our needs and make the decision that sits right with us in that moment. **What are some aspects of labor and delivery where you might anticipate feeling out of control? What are some ways you can remind yourself of your birth wishes and convey that to others, even if you may feel anxious?**



VIII. Tamar

Like many stories of women in the bible, Tamar's narrative is complex and gets quite messy. The two men she had been married to from the House of Judah had both been killed, one after the other. Tamar becomes a childless widow just as quickly as she had been married. In ancient times, this was a lowly social status and usually meant that the woman would be sent back to live in her father's house forever, with no more potential matches and no possibilities of becoming a mother. Tamar, who wanted more than anything to become pregnant and make descendants for her deceased husband's bloodline, took things into her own hands. She was a go-getter! So much so that she was willing to trick her father-in-law (by disguising herself as a harlot on the streets) into sleeping with her in order to conceive. I know, I know... in modern times, this is not only incredibly immoral but it is also almost unheard of. And while it was just as socially unacceptable back in ancient days, the rabbis actually applauded Tamar's efforts because of her commitment and dedication to attaining what she knew to be right in her heart. As a result, God not only blessed Tamar with a child but blessed her entire future descendants. Tamar's descendants gave way to some of the greatest of the greats: King David, Isaiah, and Amoz.

And just to be clear: the Torah is not condoning sleeping with your father-in-law when you're having trouble conceiving or finding a partner with which to start a family. Far from it! But the Torah is highlighting Tamar's unyielding determination and persistence to accomplish what it is that you want, not just for your own pride, but for the future generations of your family. **When you dream about your grandchildren, your great-grandchildren, your great-great-grandchildren... what types of people do you hope they will become? What values do you wish for them to hold dear? What of your personality, achievements, or outlook on life do you hope they will remember you by?**



IX. Reflection opportunity

Which matriarchs or feminine characters of our tradition speak to you and why?

Which birth and/or postpartum story do you relate to? Which do you hope to avoid?

How might you incorporate these strong women into your pregnancy and birth experiences?

Write a letter to a woman of your choice from the selection above, sharing your hopes and fears for your pregnancy, birth, and postpartum.



Chapter 2

B'Sha'ah Tovah: You're Pregnant!



יֵשׁ יְהוָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי

"Surely there is God in this place and I did not know it."

Genesis 28:16

I. Why Should I Say “B’sha’ah Tovah” Instead of “Mazal Tov”?

It’s ok if the phrase “B’Sha’ah Tovah” is foreign to you. Most Jews are taught that when something exciting or celebratory is taking place, the proper greeting is “mazal tov.” This is true for perhaps every celebration except pregnancy. As you’ll learn as you continue reading, pregnancy in both the ancient and modern worlds can be fraught with anxiety and fear. What if something happens to the baby while its developing? What if you have a miscarriage? What if something happens to the birthing person before its their time to give birth? It is out of an abundance of caution that Jews do not celebrate with “mazal tov” (which literally translates to “good luck”), a greeting reserved for after something good has been achieved. Instead, we wish “b’sha’ah tovah” to the expecting person. This phrase literally translates to “at a good hour” or less literally “may your birth happen at the time that your birth is meant to happen.” This powerful, golden phrase reminds us of the intentional lack of control we experience during pregnancy and wisely avoids the pitfalls of premature celebration. Why are Jews so cautious to celebrate early? Learn more in part IV of this chapter.

II. Genesis Creation Story from a Conception Perspective, Tzimtzum

Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), also known by the acronym “Ari” or “Arizal” is known as one of the greatest kabbalists of all times. He founded a new school in *Kabbalah* called “Lurianic Kabbalah,” which is the basis of almost all Jewish mystical works today. One of my favorite teachings in all of *Kabbalah* is that of *Tzimtzum*, the doctrine that God began the world by contracting God’s self in order to create. Read on for a deeper explanation of *Tzimtzum*. If you can’t already tell, I am so in love with this concept in relation to creation and birthing that I named my doula company after it! www.TzimTzumDoula.com

The Ari writes:

In the beginning, a simple divine light filled the entirety of existence... When there arose in God’s simple will the desire to create the worlds, God contracted God’s light, withdrawing it to the sides and leaving a void and an empty space in its center, to allow for the existence of the worlds... God then drew a single line of God’s infinite light into the void to illuminate the worlds.

A little confusing? Stay with me. *The Ari* is basically explaining that at the very beginning of time, in order for God to create the world, God needed to contract God’s self. God literally endured contractions, just like a woman in labor. In other words, in order to create something, we must take a step back and withdraw ourselves to make space for the new. This might look like physically contracting our wombs in order to create new life just as God did, or it might look like learning how to withdraw our voices in order to make space for lesser heard voices, or perhaps it even looks like taking care of loved ones in our lives and learning how and when to lift up the needs of others while quieting our own needs temporarily to care for them.

Tzimtzum is a powerful tool for understanding the beauty of creation in our world. God models this for us, and people with uteruses who choose to create life in their wombs have the privilege and honor of experiencing this *Tzimtzum* first hand: not only through the waves of labor but through parenthood and life at large. In letting go and learning how to contract ourselves, we open ourselves and invite new creations and possibilities into our worlds.



III. Early Pregnancy in the Ancient World

Conception and pregnancy in the ancient world has always been considered an act of the Divine. Jews believed that there are three partners in creation: two parents and God. *The Zohar* declares that God created all human souls at the time of the creation of the universe, and so God decides which of these souls enters each womb at conception, carried by way of angel messengers (*The Zohar*, page 157).

But, despite the holy imagery and attention a person's womb might receive in the initial stages of pregnancy, Jews have traditionally kept early pregnancies very hushed. Proud or excited talk of the news of a successful conception was believed to open the door for catastrophe (see chapter 4 for more). This is why there are so many rituals, precautions, and guidelines associated with Jewish pregnancy. Whereas today, modern science can tell us whether our pregnancy is healthy or if there are prenatal issues, in ancient times, Jews only had the use of forecasts and omens to reduce this anxiety.

How did women realize they were pregnant in ancient times? The Talmud actually gives criteria for this. The ancient rabbis explained that “menses cease and convert to breast milk, and a woman experiences heaviness of head and limbs” (*A Time To Be Born*, page 85). Of course, the rabbis were not modern doctors, but they got it pretty darn close. Sure, menstrual blood does not magically convert into breast milk, but they are accurate in that most women realized they were pregnant once they missed their periods for a couple of months (and some felt it sooner... just like we all vary today in our pregnancy realization timelines). And in some cases, Jewish astrologers were employed to confirm a woman's pregnancy by way of looking at the night sky and examining the configuration of the planets and stars.

IV. Life Inside the Womb: Ancient Belief

Once a person learns of their pregnancy, Jewish tradition considers the fetus (though not yet a human soul) to be just as much a part of her body as her arms or legs. The Talmudic sages were fascinated by the fetus. Like we still wonder today, they asked: “Can a fetus have emotions? Can a fetus engage in intellectual activity? Is a fetus' personality developed in the womb or nurtured after birth?” Later, medieval Jewish mystics picked up where the sages left off, exploring this topic further. The mystics believed that God sends an angel to deliver various attributes and qualities to the growing fetus: their strengths and weaknesses, their physical appearance like height or weight or eye color, their future economic status in life, and more.

In ancient times, emphasis was placed on the pregnant mother's activity and experiences and how they may impact the growing fetus in these precious early weeks and months of pregnancy. This was particularly true of the mother's diet. In fact, the Talmud detailed what pregnant women should and should not eat, perhaps an extension of the story of Manoah's wife we visited in chapter 1. For example, a mother should eat meat and wine in moderation, eggs for baby's eyesight, fish for gracefulness, parsley for brilliance, coriander to make the baby adorably chunky, and citron so the baby smells sweet. Alternatively, a mother should avoid mustard so the child does not become gluttonous, clay so that child does not appear ugly, and cress so the child is not dull. Many Jewish thinkers, including Maimonides, preached the importance of satisfying cravings in early pregnancy and to ignore them may bring harm to the growing fetus.

Overall, there was an understanding that life outside the womb directly impacts life inside the womb. Pregnancy was (and still is today) a vulnerable, dangerous, fragile position.



V. Keeping Safe from The Evil Eye During Pregnancy.

The Evil Eye is known to be a lurking spiritual force (sometimes associated with Lilith, a female figure in Mesopotamian and Judaic mythology, the first wife of Adam, and supposedly a she-demon) that wreaks havoc on people's lives. Because pregnancy, birth, and postpartum are times in a woman's life when she is most vulnerable, fear of the Evil Eye looms large. In the Middle East during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, Sephardic Jews sewed baby clothes for a mother in her final month of pregnancy. These clothes would be adorned with colorful ribbons and sprigs of rue to protect the baby from the Evil Eye. Ashkenazi Jews, on the other hand, traditionally do not celebrate or materially prepare for the birth of a baby until after the fact because they feel celebrating before something's time attracts the Evil Eye. Many Jews today still follow this superstition.

VI. Modern Day Rituals and Prayers for Early Pregnancy.

With each pregnancy comes many "first" moments. Prayer can be one meaningful avenue to elevate these powerful experiences and connect you (and your growing baby) to the Divine. Here are just a few:

Prayer for Discovering You Are Pregnant

from *A Ceremonies Sampler: New Rites, Celebrations, and Observances of Jewish Women*
by Elizabeth Resnick Levine, adapted for gender inclusivity

Together (with partner or solo):

We stand breathless before the Power of Creation that works through us to bring forth new life. We tremble with fear and with joy.

Pregnant person:

Deep inside me a seed is growing. I am afraid, and I am filled with ecstasy.

Together (with partner or solo):

May this promise of life come to be- our child. We trust in the source of life, this power which grips us within and yet transcends us. Protect this fragile new beginning. May we find love and strength to nurture this gift of fertility and life. Sheltered under wings of love, may we grow to be partners with the source of life in the miracle of creation.

*Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam,
Shehecheyanu v'kiyamanu v'higianu lazman hazeh.*

Blessed by the presence whose sanctity fills our lives, we give thanks for
life, health, and this sacred moment.



M'ugelet

from *A Ceremonies Sampler: New Rites, Celebrations, and Observances of Jewish Women*
by Elizabeth Resnick Levine

I call this ritual *m'ugelet*, which is a Hebrew pun meaning both “she becomes round,” referring to the condition of pregnancy, and “she is encircled,” the main activity of the ritual.

One of the women in my group brought a long cord which has been wrapped around Rachel’s tomb in Israel. In legend, Rachel is often called the mother of Israel, a spiritual presence whose caring for her children continues to this day. Women have made pilgrimages to her tomb for centuries.

The women stood around me in a circle, holding the cord. I recited the following prayer, which is written in the style of Ashkenazi *techinas*, Yiddish women’s folk prayers of the 16th through 20th centuries:

Merciful and gracious Creator, have compassion on your loving handmaid _____ bat _____, that she may have her child safely and in good health. May the merit of our holy foremothers Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, Leah, Bilha, and Ziplah, and the merit of our great leaders Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, and Judith, sustain me through my time of danger. May You help me avoid unhealthy acts and stay far away from any drink, smoke, or food which might harm the precious life within me. May this child be born in spacious straits, with room to spare. As You opened the Red Sea so that the children of Israel could pass through it unharmed, please open my waters and birth canal so that this child is born safely and without pain. May this little one grow to be a righteous person, always living in the path of Torah and *ma’asim tovim* (good deeds), and may the Jewish people merit true redemption in this one’s lifetime. Amen.

I then went to one of the women who was holding an end of the cord. She wrapped the end around my belly and passed me to the woman next to her. As I was passed around the circle of women, the cord encircled my pregnant womb. The women whispered blessings to me such as “good birth!” “healthy baby!” “easy pregnancy!” etc., forming a symbolic protective space for me and the life I held within me.

Prayer for Morning Sickness

from *The Jewish Pregnancy Book* by Sandy Falk, M.D., and Rabbi Daniel Judson

Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, ruler of the universe, who created women with wisdom and created within women a womb. It is obvious and known before your throne of glory that if my body was not working properly, it would be impossible for this pregnancy to survive.

Blessed are You, Adonai, who heals all flesh and acts wondrously.



VII. Reflection Opportunity

What are ways that you find yourself engaging in *TzimTzum* (contracting yourself) during your pregnancy or postpartum?

Though modern science can tell us so much about our growing baby, what is something that it cannot answer for us that you find yourself still wondering? What would you ask a Jewish astrologer?

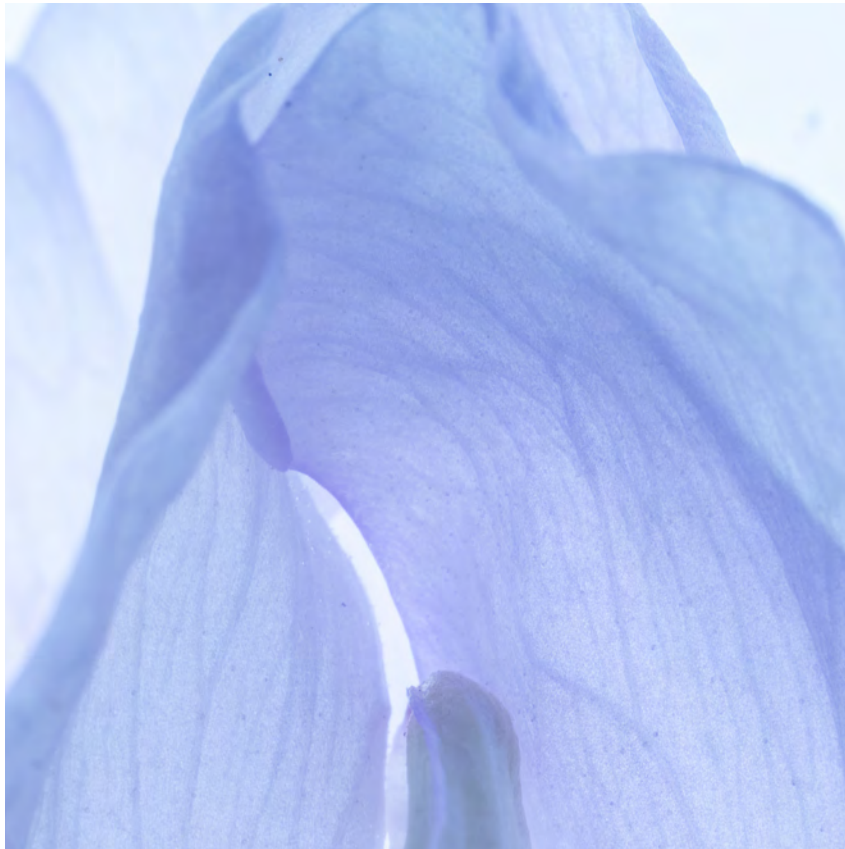
Have you felt the presence of the Evil Eye on your journey so far? How might you protect yourself and your family from the Evil Eye moving forward?

How might you ritualize your pregnancy or make the beginning of a pregnancy meaningful for you?



Chapter 3

Growing Soulfully Round



*"There is such a special sweetness
in being able to participate in
creation."*

Pamela S. Nadav

I. Ancient Belief About The Fetus and The Soul

Some believe that spirituality is a relatively new phenomenon that emerged as a result of the millennials and Gen X-ers needing a little something “extra.” However, spirituality has been around for thousands of years. Judaism has its own study of spirituality, thought to be too powerful and dangerous to study until you reach the age of 40, called “*The Zohar*.” This foundational work in the literature of Jewish mysticism is called Kabbalah.

Our ancients had a lot to say about pregnancy and spirituality, the fetus’ spiritual life in particular. The most common belief, according to Talmudic sages, is that a Divine light burns above the head of the fetus in the womb and enables it to see from one end of the world to the other! *The Zohar* attests that four angels-- Michael, Gabriel, Nuriel, and Raphael-- accompany the baby’s soul from the supernal world to the fetus’ physical body. Think your little one is bored during all those dark months in your womb? Think again! The angel Gabriel teaches the fetus the entirety of the Torah and seventy languages while in your belly! That’s right. The ancients believed the fetus was hard at work, studying day and night. Some believed that the reason a newborn cries upon taking its first breath is because God wipes the baby’s memory clean of all it has learned in the womb and the baby yearns for the world they had grown accustomed to. This is why, in some Jewish circles to this day, a “*Vacht Nacht*” is held: an all-night Torah study party leading into the day of the baby’s bris or naming in an effort to comfort the baby by surrounding it by Torah study again.

II. “Kosher Sex” During Pregnancy: What Did the Ancients Say and Believe?

Unlike some other religions, Judaism teaches that intercourse is not solely for the purpose of procreation. Sex can also be purely for pleasure. In order for us to understand what the ancients thought about sex during pregnancy, we need to appreciate the rabbis’ understanding of a woman’s anatomy (and let’s cut them a little slack here... for not knowing too much back then, they sure guessed semi-accurately!). The ancient rabbis thought a woman’s womb was divided into three sections: the upper, middle, and lower compartments. During the first trimester, the fetus would exist mostly in the lowest compartment. As pregnancy continued and the fetus grew, the fetus would slowly ascend higher and higher in the woman’s womb until it reached the uppermost compartment. This is where the fetus would do a somersault, more or less, and begin to face downward. In fact, rabbis thought that the fetus’ somersault was what caused women’s pain in labor.

As a result of the rabbis’ belief that the fetus is in the lowest compartment during the first trimester, sex at this time was frowned upon. They believed that penetration might cause harm to the fetus and the mother. Of course, we know that this is not entirely true today, though sometimes our OBGYN or midwife might warn us against first trimester sex if we have high risk pregnancies. So while we know in modern times that penetration cannot reach the fetus (who is safely sealed off and protected by the “bag of waters” that breaks when we go into labor), we do still believe that the first trimester is a time of fragility, warranting an overabundance of caution.



After the first trimester, the ancient rabbis believed that sex was actually beneficial to the fetus because semen was thought to give vitality to the growing seed! And most importantly, it was widely known (and still is to this day!) that sex in the final weeks of the third trimester is helpful for the fetus and the mother (*Niddah* 31a) because orgasms create oxytocin, and oxytocin yields contractions. So if you're pregnant, beyond 37 weeks, you have your doctor's blessing, and you're feeling frisky... the rabbis say go for it!

Fun Fact: the positions you enjoy during intercourse are often the same positions that are beneficial for laboring and giving birth!

III. Modern Rituals for the Spiritual Development of Your Baby

As we've already discussed, the attitudes, behavior, nutritional choices, and overall health and well-being of the pregnant person has a major impact on the development of the baby. This was preached by the ancient rabbis and continues to be true today. So, how might we care for the spiritual development of our growing baby today? The answer is simple: continue exploring your own spiritual development. Let's walk through this exercise together:

Think about your day today:

When you woke up this morning, what was the first thought on your mind? As you got yourself ready for the day, what was on your heart? As the day continued and you became consumed by chores or to-do list items or text messages or news updates, did you allow yourself time and space for quiet? For processing? For being gentle with yourself?

The answers to these questions may begin to open the door to deepening your own spirituality. If we begin to be more mindful about moments in our day-to-day lives that could be enhanced, improved, or even just slowed down, we are not only doing ourselves a favor, but we are also nurturing and supporting the little life inside our wombs.

Other ways of contributing to the *Jewish* spiritual development of your baby include:

- Reciting *Modeh Ani* to your baby each morning
- Reciting the *Shema* to your baby each night
- Begin a practice of studying Torah with your baby by reaching out to a rabbi for regular one-on-one study sessions or simply buying a Jewish book you've always been curious about and reading it to your baby
- Sing Jewish songs to your baby or play your favorite Jewish music playlist while getting things done around the house
- Go on a daily walk while telling your baby all the things you are grateful for that day
- Join a local Jewish pregnancy group and build community with other Jewish parents-to-be
- Celebrate Shabbat and sing the prayers to your baby
- Talk to your baby about what you hope their Hebrew name will be and the meaning behind it
- Simply close your eyes and hold your belly and envision what raising a Jewish child means to you, and what you hope for them to experience, learn, and discover along their Jewish journeys
- Immerse in a *mikveh*, a Jewish ritual bath, in your 9th month of pregnancy
- Begin a practice of making a donation (even a small amount) to a meaningful charity of your choice after each OBGYN/Midwife check-up in honor of your growing baby



Prayer Following Feeling The First “Quickening” Sensation

taken from *The Jewish Pregnancy Book* by Sandy Falk, M.D., and Rabbi Daniel Judson

Barukh Atah Adonai Asher Biyado Nefesh Kol Chai V’Ruach Kol Basar
Blessed are You, Adonai, in whose hand is the breath of all life and the spirit of all flesh.

Prayer Before An Ultrasound

by Susan Silverman

*My God,
As Life grows within me,
I hear the miraculous heartbeat
And sense stretching arms and legs
(does this emerging life sense me, as I sense You? Reach to me, as I reach to You?)
As I hope for this tiny one’s well-being
And know its vulnerability
And look upon this person-in-process*

*May I become closer to You,
Trusting in You, reaching for You, and seeking to live in Your presence. You provide for our well-being.*

*You are Av Harachaman, Compassionate Parent,
In Your image, I seek to provide gentleness, love, and acceptance.*

*Show me
Through Your abundant goodness
The way to a holy relationship.*

Prayer For Entering The Seventh Month of Pregnancy

adapted from an 18th century Italian prayer book for women, adaptation found in Out of the Depths I Call To You by Cardin 78-84

Lord our God and God of our forebears, may it be Your will that I easily suffer the strains of pregnancy. Continually grant me stamina throughout the pregnancy so that the baby’s strength may not fail, nor mine, in any way. Let the child be born speedily, and may I give birth easily and quickly without any harm either to me or to the child. Let the child be born when the time is right, at a propitious moment, so he may enjoy a full life of peace, health, and pleasantness, of goodness, prosperity and honor.



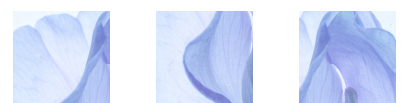
IV. Reflection Opportunity

How will you practice, or welcome, spirituality into your pregnancy experience? What are concrete steps you might like to take?

If you had to write your own prayer for the growth of your baby (and yourself, as you become a parent), what might it say?

How has sexual intimacy changed in your life since becoming pregnant? How might other acts of love and passion contribute to the development of your baby?

What do you believe about the soul of your baby? What in your life might be impacting its development? What type of soul do you think your baby has?



Chapter 4

Building Your Jewish Nest



*"Just as my ancestors planted for
me, so shall I plant for my
children"*

Ta'anit 32a

I. The Science Behind the Urge "To Nest"

If you've been pregnant before, or if you have spent time around other pregnant people, no doubt you have felt or heard of the "nesting instinct." This overwhelming urge that pregnant people feel to suddenly start cleaning, organizing, or rearranging is actually not as irrational as it appears. Rather, it is an adaptive behavior stemming from our evolutionary past that acts as a mechanism for protecting our unborn babies. Pregnancy can make many people feel out of control. So "nesting" sometimes provides the pregnant person with the control they are so desperately craving. Believe it or not, the urge to create a safe environment for your baby is a parent's first (physical) step in connecting and bonding with their child. This behavior is a tale as old as time. Ancient Jews had many ways of preparing for the birth of a baby, including various forms of nesting. Let's explore these together.

II. Jewish Superstitions and Traditions Around Preparing to Bring Baby Home

As we have discussed in previous chapters, some Jewish people believe that celebrating something before its time is an invitation for trouble from the Evil Eye. This is why in modern times, most Ashkenazi Jews do not hold baby showers or parties to welcome a baby into a family before it is born... though this Ashkenazi superstition may be quickly changing! Personally, my husband and I chose to leave the nursery almost completely empty until bringing our baby home. Any gifts or packages that we had preemptively received were quickly and quietly stowed away under a blanket in both of our car trunks. I wanted to be sure to follow this custom to a T. Once our son entered our house, my husband got to work assembling all the baby furniture and organizing toys, bottles, and burp rags galore. Looking back on those first few days when the apartment was in complete disarray and the three of us were sleep deprived, mentally groggy, and totally consumed with our new roles as parents, I think it would have benefitted us to have had a nursery already organized. It made me happy to know I succeeded in keeping the Evil Eye out of our home and away from our precious baby, but I was a bundle of anxiety trying to figure out which nipple went to which bottle and where we should keep the diapers and how to install blackout curtains. Will I abandon this custom for our future pregnancies? I'm not sure. But, it is important to note that whether you subscribe to this Jewish superstition or not, never judge another person for their choice. Every family is different and every obstacle they face presents different challenges and considerations. Beyond the importance of Jewish custom is the holiness of Shalom Bayit or peace in the home. Whatever you need to do to maintain the serenity of the safe space of your home, do it, whether that means keeping the Evil Eye away at all costs and following every Jewish superstition in order to do so, or if that instead looks like color coding your baby's future wardrobe in their closet so you feel at peace. Shalom Bayit comes first.

Now let's kick it old school. What does ancient Judaism have to say about bringing baby home?



Well, nearly all babies were born at home. Home birth was not some hippy-new-wave trend that the ancient Israelites thought was in vogue. Rather, home birth was the norm, and midwives were the go-to deliverers. So while there were no formal rituals for the first time a baby enters their home, (err, hut) there definitely were Jewish rituals for immediately welcoming the newborn to the world in those initial few hours. Here are just a few of these beautiful ancient customs:

- **Salt** | Ancient Israelites would rub the baby with salt shortly after the baby was born (at home). This practice is thought to have been a purification rite in response to the blood of childbirth. The midwives would rub the baby with salt and then follow with moisturizing oil before swaddling them for the first time. The rubbing of salt and oil was believed to build the baby's character (in addition to soothing the skin). This practice continued up until the early twentieth-century in Palestine.
- **Placenta** | The Tanakh does not say anything specifically about handling the placenta. However, the Talmud tells us that there was a custom of preserving the placenta in a bowl with oil, straw, and sand for a day or two and then burying the placenta during the baby's first days "home" to symbolize the circle of life. It was believed that the placenta had magical properties (let's be honest... it totally does!) and needed to be handled with extreme care. The placenta burial ritual is especially important for women who are anxious about having another child or experiencing childbirth again. To combat this anxiety, women planted their placenta beneath the threshold of their house for protection from evil baby-snatching spirits, believing that if they stepped over it several times, the holiness of the placenta would re-enter her body and be born again as her next child.
- **Color** | Red and blue are powerful, magical colors in the Jewish birth world. Often, a red string (see Chapter 5, Part V for more information) was tied to the newborn's sleeping place in the home for protection. Similarly, blue-- a color known to avert the Evil Eye-- also frequently surrounds newborn babies by way of beads tied to their clothing or swaddles.
- **Baby Bath** | In ancient Morocco, Jewish women would bathe the newborn in water with a cracked raw egg and gold bangles as a symbol that the baby should grow strong and have good fortune!
- **Psalms** | Psalm 91 and Psalm 121 were often pasted to the wall (or kept open to that page in a *siddur*) next to or on top of the front door to the house of the newborn. These psalms protect the mother and baby. In my home, we kept these taped to the inside of our front door for the first year of our baby's life! Never hurts to have extra protection and spirituality.



III. 8 Ways You Can Build a Jewish Environment at Home for Your Baby Before They Arrive Earthside

1. Affix a *mezuzah* to every door in your home, especially the baby's room
2. Request baby's first *tzedekah* box on your baby registry and consider adding coins to it together prior to each Shabbat
3. Spend time putting together a bookshelf of Jewish books that are meaningful to you. This might not necessarily be solely a book of The Torah, but might also include other Jewish books you hope your child will explore someday (like Isaac Bashevis Singer, Philip Roth, or Elie Wiesel)
4. What does the artwork in your home say about your values or your Jewish identity? Find something to hang in your home that brings a sense of Jewish meaning to your home
5. What recipes are favorites in your home? Have you explored Jewish recipes? These are the aromas your child will grow up knowing and associating with your love and with being home. Experiment with perfecting that latke or matzo ball soup recipe!
6. On Shabbat, parents bless their children at the dinner table. What blessing will you whisper in your child's ear each week? What do you hope they will know or how do you hope they will feel upon receiving this weekly blessing from you?
7. In Judaism, we have a code of *mitzvot* (commandments that set boundaries for Jewish behavior). Which commandments are you going to encourage your family to follow? Which commitments will you strive to make and how do you plan to Jewishly reinforce them?
8. Consider what is "the Torah" that you are going to pass on to your child. What are the ethical and moral teachings you hope Jewish tradition will espouse for them? What are the lessons, family stories, and other "gems of life" that you want to be certain they are raised hearing?

IV. Packing Your Jewish Hospital Bag

Ah, the famed hospital bag. You've probably already read article after article and seen post after post warning you against overpacking or underpacking and promising you that a certain product will be a "lifesaver." Take a deep breath. Remember what truly matters. You will be bringing your beautiful little soul home with you, whether you remembered an extra hair tie or not. But what might actually be helpful for you to remember to pack with you from a Jewish perspective?

When I gave birth to my son, I wanted my hospital room to feel as spiritual as possible. It was important to me that it felt like a tent- intimate, safe, and thoughtfully decorated with loving and supportive pieces. There is a midrash that says there are angels who guard a woman as she labors and that these angels are named *yitadot* which literally translates to "tent pegs." This took the form of buying several yards of fabric and draping it across one of the walls of my hospital room. On the draped fabric- or my *Sukkat Shalom*, my refuge of peace, I hung inspirational quotes and notes that women in my family had mailed to me, wishing me luck and telling me what a wonderful parent I was going to be. I also requested these same women to each mail me a bead of their choosing for me to string together as an amulet. I grasped the amulet (ok, ok, I *squeezed* the amulet) in my hand for my entire labor and it brought me comfort, peace, and resilience. Another special feature of my hospital room was a shviti (see Chapter 5) that my mother had drawn for me. A powerful phrase from the Torah about opening ourselves decorated the edges of the shviti. All of these small but mighty Jewish details enhanced my labor experience and made it feel uniquely Jewish and meaningful.



Below is a list of 12 items (and thoughts) to consider that go beyond a change of underwear & socks:

1. A particular photo or Jewish piece of artwork (even printed off the internet!) that comforts you to look at
2. A *shviti* created by a family member, friend, or artist of your choosing
3. Create a playlist of Jewish songs that bring you peace and comfort to play in the background as you labor
4. Place 4 objects in your hospital room: one in each corner. One object should represent your past, another your present, your future, and your hope for your baby
5. Write out your favorite sentence, phrase, or paragraph from the Torah that empowers you
6. Consider bringing a *siddur* (prayer book) or the Book of Psalms for you, your partner, or your doula to read as you labor
7. Memorize a *kavvanah* (intention) or mantra for your labor and delivery and breathe it as you feel a surge
8. Spend a quiet moment in your 9th month to write a prayer for your baby's life. After you deliver your baby, read this prayer out loud with your partner, holding your baby in your arms.
9. That first drive home from the hospital can feel painfully long and scary (especially if you're the driver with that new precious cargo in the backseat!). Consider reciting a personal prayer for your safety on your journey home, before you hit the road.
10. Print *Shir HaMaalot* (Psalm 121), a prayer used to protect mother and child after birth, and place the prayer under your baby's hospital bassinet or over the interior doorway to your hospital room
11. Choose a Hebrew name for your baby (see Chapter 7)
12. Create and bring an amulet for your baby, also called *Kame'ot* in Sephardic Jewish tradition

What do you want to add to your bag?



V. Reflection Opportunity

How do you envision bringing your baby home? What feelings are you expecting?

How might you adapt one, or several, ancient rituals into your experience of stepping through your front door with your little one for the very first time?

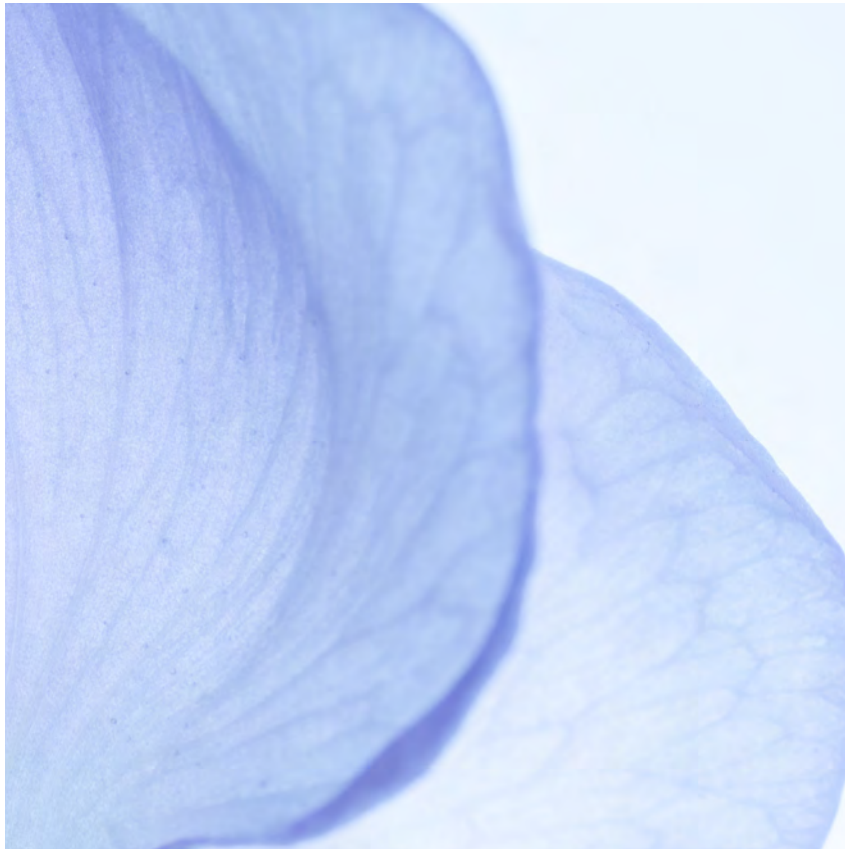
How have you built a Jewish home for your little one so far, and what plans do you have as your child grows older to ensure your home is one of Jewish spirit?

What is one concrete step you will take to welcome your baby into your Jewish home?



Chapter 5

Jewish Birth *Segulot*: How These Ancient Symbols Protect Birthers



"The world is a narrow bridge and the most important thing is to not be afraid."

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov

I. Birth Amulets

Clearly, ancient Jews (and people in modern times as well, of course) believed that bad things in life - and particularly in childbirth- could be avoided if certain magical formulas or objects were utilized. Because childbirth is a *really big deal*, it is completely natural to feel a whole host of emotions in preparation for it. So, it makes complete sense that our ancestors tried everything in their power to turn their anxieties into amulets that might protect them and their growing families. Amulets took the form of everything from incantations, quotes, Torah passages, God's name, or personal dedications. These were inscribed onto pottery, cloth, jewelry, artwork, parchment, cards and more. For example, Jews in the Ottoman Empire would embroider God's name (*Shaddai*- "the breasted one") onto a headress the new mother would wear while recovering in bed postpartum.

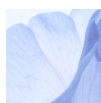
II. Keys

1. Rabbi Yoḥanan said: There are three keys maintained in the hand of the Holy One, which were not transmitted to an intermediary, i.e., God tends to these matters. And they are: The key of rain, the key of birthing, and the key of the resurrection of the dead. (*Taanit* 2A)
2. It is taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Elazar says: Just as a house has hinges [*tzirim*], so too, a woman has hinges, as it is stated: "And she bowed herself and brought forth, for her pains [*tzireha*] came suddenly upon her" (I Samuel 4:19). Rabbi Yehoshua says: Just as a house has doors, so too, a woman has doors, as it is stated: "Because it did not shut the doors of my womb" (*Job* 3:10). Rabbi Akiva says: Just as there is a key to a house, so too, there is a key to a woman, as it is stated: "And He opened her womb" (Genesis 30:22). (*Bekhorot* 45a)
3. The Hebrew word for contractions "*tzirim*" translates to "hinges" (from the book, *Anatomy of the Soul*, by Chaim Kramer)
4. Rebbe Nachman teaches that the *sefirah* of *malchut* (associated with women) is connect to the letter *DALET* - which has the same letters as *DELET* door - which must be opened for birth to take place (from the book, *Anatomy of the Soul*, by Chaim Kramer)
5. It was customary among the Jews of Morocco to choose a bachelor to tie a belt around the stomach of a pregnant woman, and to close the belt with a little lock. As long as the lock remained closed, the woman's womb would also remain closed, and she would not deliver her fetus. When the months of full pregnancy passed, the young man would open the lock and the woman was then ready to give birth
6. In Scotland, to ensure an easy labor, it was customary to open every lock in a Jewish house.
7. In Frankfort, the birther would hold the key to the synagogue during her labor. Pregnant women hang a closed lock on their necks and throw away the key.

Prayer About Keys & Labor

by Rabbi Hayyim Palache

*In Your hand, our God and God of our fathers, is the key of birth, that was not entrusted to any angel.
Therefore, recall Your mercy, Our Lord and Your Compassion...*



III. Iron

Iron was an important motif in childbirth for non-Jews and Jews alike in ancient times. But, are you ready for something mind-blowingly awesome?! Our four matriarch's names, Bilhah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Leah, spell out the Hebrew word *Barzel*. What does *Barzel* translate to? Iron! The association of these four powerful women with the magic of iron was particularly important to the medieval Jews in Mediterranean lands, Jews who practiced magic (yes, Jews practiced "practical" magic!) in Eastern Europe, and the German Jews of the Middle Ages. In more modern times, Jews who lived in Germany, North Africa, Bulgaria, Palestine, Syria, and Afghanistan use iron as part of the blade of a sword or knife to protect the mother and baby during postpartum. In Iraq, for instance, this sometimes meant placing the blade of a knife beneath the new mother's pillow. This iron blade was even used in a ritual to dispel Lilith's baby-snatching evil spirit (though, of course, I believe Lilith has truly gotten a bad rep solely by virtue of being a woman! More on this in Chapter 7) in a ceremony called *tahdid* that was performed nightly during the week following a baby's birth.

IV. Animals

Rav Avira taught the following (in *Sotah* 11b:4): In the merit of the righteous women that were in that generation, the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt. When the women would go to the river to draw water, the Holy One would materialize for them small fish that would enter into their pitchers, and they would therefore draw pitchers that were half filled with water and half filled with fish. And they would then come and place two pots on the fire, one pot of hot water for washing their husbands and one pot of fish with which to feed them. And they would then take what they prepared to their husbands, to the field, and would bathe their husbands and anoint them with oil and feed them the fish and give them to drink and bond with them in sexual intercourse ... And when these women would become pregnant, they would come back to their homes, and when the time for them to give birth would arrive they would go and give birth in the field under the apple tree, as it is stated: "Under the apple tree I awakened you; there your mother was in travail with you; there was she in travail and brought you forth" (Song of Songs 8:5). And the Holy One would send from the heavens above an angel who would clean and prepare the newborns, just as a midwife prepares the newborn, as it is stated: "And as for your birth, on the day you were born, your navel was not cut nor were you washed with water for cleansing; you were not salted at all, nor swaddled at all" (Ezekiel 16:4). And then, the angel would gather for them two round stones from the field and the babies would nurse from that which would flow out of them. One of the stones flowed with oil and one of the stones flowed with honey...

"The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, and he said: When you deliver the Hebrew women, and you look upon the stones [*ovnayim*], if it be a son, then you shall kill him; but if it be a daughter, then she shall live" (Exodus 1:16). "But the midwives feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt spoke about them [*aleihen*].

After being questioned by Pharaoh, the midwives responded, "Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women, for they are lively [*hayot*], and are delivered before the midwife comes to them" (Exodus 1:19). This nation is compared to an animal [*hayya*], and animals give birth without a midwife. "How your mother was a lioness; among lions she crouched, in the midst of the young lions she reared her whelps" (Ezekiel 19:2), indicating that all the Jewish people are compared to animals. (*Sotah* 11b)



V. Voice & Sound

1. From where is this matter derived whereby the Sages stated: Anyone who asks for compassion from Heaven on behalf of another, and he requires compassion from Heaven concerning that same matter, he is answered first? Rabba bar Mari said to him that the source for this is as it is written: “And the Lord changed the fortune of Job, when he prayed for his friends” (*Job* 42:10). Rava said to him: You said the proof from there, from a verse in the Writings, and I say the proof from here, from a verse in the Torah. As it is written: “And Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants, and they bore children” (*Genesis* 20:17), and it is written immediately following that: “And the Lord remembered Sarah, as He had said” (*Genesis* 21:1), with the pronoun interpreted homiletically: As Abraham said with regard to Abimelech. Because Abraham prayed for Abimelech that the women of his household should give birth, Abraham himself was answered concerning that matter. (*Bava Kamma* 92A)
2. “Someone who requests mercy for his fellow when he needs the very same thing, he is answered first.” Needing the very same thing and not asking it for himself—this is the result of his being in the aspect of nothingness, which is the aspect of “first,” namely, prior to Creation. And because he is in the aspect of first, he is consequently answered first. (*Likutei Moharan* 22:10:12)
3. Three sounds travel from the end of the world to its other end, and these are: The sound of the sphere of the sun, and the sound of the bustle of the crowds of Rome, and the sound of the soul at the moment that it leaves the body, which should be audible throughout the world. And some say: Even the sound of a woman giving birth. (*Yoma* 20b)

VI. Shviti

A *shiviti* (שוֹיטִי) is an artsy, meditative representation of a Hebrew verse, usually from the book Psalms. It is crowned at the top of the illustration with the sacred name of God, followed by the rest of the passage, usually set in the shape of the Temple lamp stand, though there are infinite other shapes it may take. A *shiviti* is used in *Kabbalah*, Jewish mysticism, for contemplation of the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter Hebrew theonym יְהוָה, one of the names of God. It is believed that if a woman focuses all of her might and attention fully on the letters of the spelling of God’s name, she will begin experiencing contractions and endure a smoother birth process. Care to give it a try? Design your own *shiviti* or commission an artist or friend to draw one for you!



In advance of the birth of my firstborn, I chose a Hebrew verse that spoke to me and reminded me to literally “open” and relax. My mother, a gifted artist, drew this *shiviti* for me to concentrate on during my labor, in between contractions. This meaningful art piece is now framed in my son’s bedroom and reminds me of the love and power of Hebrew words and our tradition.



VII. The Color Red

- The word for red (*eh-dom*) and for man (*ah-dam*) have the same letters, signaling the effect of the former (red stone) on the latter (to bring about the birth of man)
- From the 17th- 19th century, Jewish folk recipes suggested a fertility potion of ruby powder (or powder from ruby-like stones) mixed with wine or alternatively that the barren woman wear a ruby as a charm
- In Izmir, Turkey, in the late 19th and early 20th century, a ring with a red stone was a treasured family heirloom, passed on by a parent to a young bride, in order to protect her and grant her a fertile, healthy future.
- Use of Red Stones (from *A Time To Be Born* and *Sefer Razi'el*):
 - Jews used reddish gems, especially Ruby, for many centuries as charms for pregnancy, associating them with Reuben's role in triggering events that led to Rachel's ability to finally conceive (read Section B below for details on this story). A 14th century text, *Sefer Gematriot*, discusses the properties of precious stones like Reuben's ruby red stone. For example, wearing the color red during pregnancy was believed to prevent women from miscarrying. Similarly, wearing it while trying to conceive was thought to boost fertility chances. And finally, wearing red during labor and birth was believed to protect women from suffering excessively in childbirth.

A. The 12 Tribes Each Had Their Own Stone

Be'otot ["according to the standards", Numbers 2:2]: There was a symbol for each leader [of each tribe], with a flag and a color, and the color of each flag was like the color of the precious stones that was over the heart of Aaron [the High Priest, i.e. on the *hoshen*/breastplate]. From this the kingdoms learned to make flags and a color for each flag. Each tribe had its own leader, and the color of the flag was similar to the color of its stone.

Reuben's stone was *adam*, and the color of his flag was red, and mandrakes were drawn on it [cf. Genesis 30:14]. Bamidbar Rabbah 2 | 7

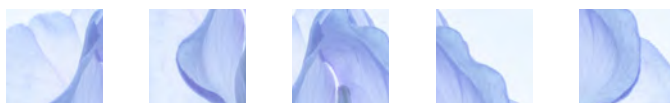
If you were to design a flag that was representative of your pregnancy to this point (or past pregnancies), what colors would you include?
How do those colors symbolize your emotions and experiences?



B. Why Reuven is Associated with The Red Stone

Scientific books claim that the basic number of gemstones, (not allowing for variants, mutations) are only 12 in number, so that they were all represented on the breastplate of the High Priest. They may be considered as the “patriarchs” of all other precious stones. The reason that the gemstone assigned to the tribe of Reuven was the **דודא** was the fact that it symbolized the blush on his face when he owned up to being guilty of his misdemeanor in Bilhah’s tent. The fact that he was not ashamed to admit his guilt is a credit to him reflected by this red-coloured stone known as “rubin.” It is supposedly found in certain areas at the bottom of the sea. It is chipped of a great rock beneath the sea, and is mined similar to silver and gold. The rock is known as Balax. Rubin and Balax are supposedly two names for the same kind of stone. The difference between them is only that the variety known as rubin is reddish looking. Onkelos also translates the word **דודא** as **סמך**, a red stone. It is the choicest of a number of subcategories of the same basic kind of precious stone. Seeing it is red, an essential color reminding us of blood, it is reputed to have the power to protect a woman who wears this jewel against ever aborting any fetus she carries.

Women who wear jewelry made from this stone will give birth to babies that have been growing in their wombs for the full nine months. The stone is even supposed to have positive effects upon women who are having a difficult delivery. If this stone will be crushed into powder and consumed with food and drink it displays properties similar to those of the **דודאים** (mandrakes?), the plant which Leah “sold” Rachel in order to help her achieve pregnancy (compare author’s comment on Genesis 30,14). The shape of those dudaim which Reuven had found at the time was the outline of a human being. This is the reason that the word **דודא**, normally spelled with the letter **ו** was spelled without that letter in order to draw our attention to the spelling which could be read “Adam,” **אדם**. The reading of the word teaches the nature of the stone, whereas the spelling teaches the effect of that stone, its function. (*Rabbeinu Bahya, Shemot 28:15*)



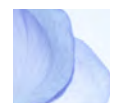
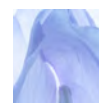
VIII. Reflection Opportunity

Which *Segulot* speak to you in your pregnancy and why?

If you were to pick a new color, aroma, object, or sound to offer you protection during your pregnancy and birth, what would you choose?

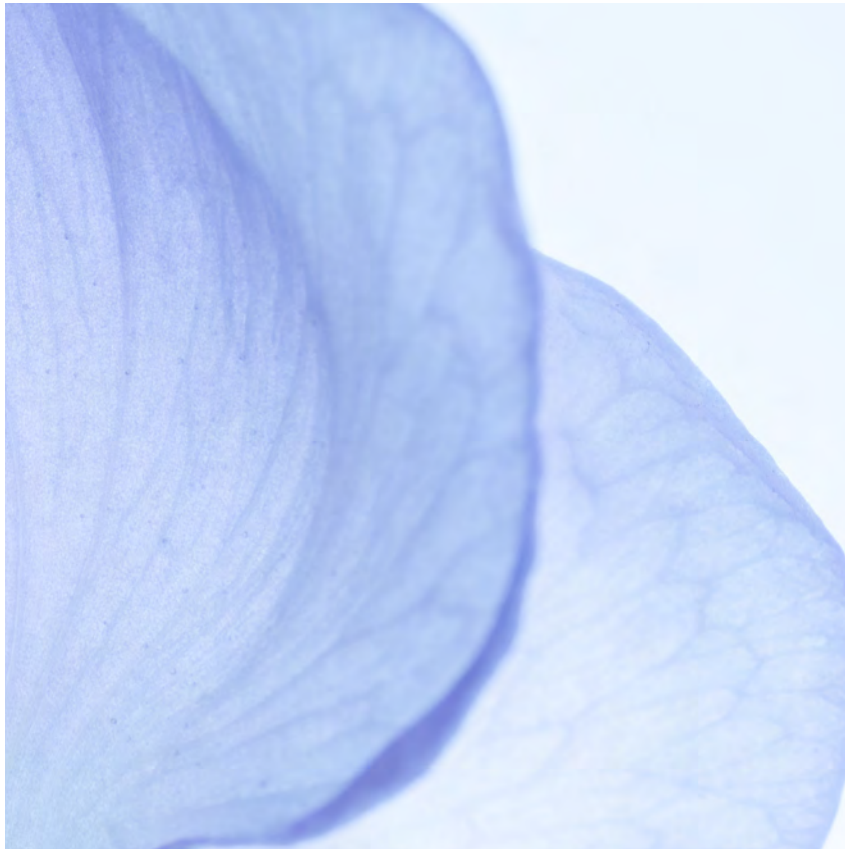
How might you choose to involve your loved ones and/or community in helping you feel protected or in creating one (or several) *Segulot* for your pregnancy?

Close your eyes and imagine feeling protected and safe during your labor and birth process. What or who is helping you feel this sense of safety? How might you allow Judaism to assist?



Chapter 6

Mazal Tov! A Jewish Birth



"A baby enters the world with hands clenched, as if to say: the world is mine and I shall grab it."

Ecclesiastes Rabbah on Ecclesiastes 5:14

I. Ancient Jewish Birth Methods and Rituals

In my humble opinion, nothing in life is more miraculous than birth. Just like in modern times, in ancient times women also experienced this sense of awe around birth, in addition to *totally normal* feelings of anxiety, fear, euphoria, joy, and the list goes on. Another thing that has not changed since ancient times is the physical experience and sensations of giving birth. Our bodies are incredible at achieving miraculous feats, but it also comes along with strong waves of intensity or pain. In ancient times, women's birth experiences ranged from dangerous, long, and painful to births that were simple, quick, and minimally uncomfortable. The range of experience in birth is just as diverse as it is to this day.

Despite these similarities, many things in the birth process have changed profoundly (for better or worse) in our society since ancient times. Let's travel back to Jewish antiquity and explore what made the birth process unique and how Jewish ritual played a role in each step of the way.

The Importance of Midwives

Did you know that being a midwife in Talmudic times was viewed as just as powerful a career/calling as being a rabbi? That is saying *a lot*. Midwives and rabbis were the only two professions allowed to be etched into a person's gravestone- all other jobs were viewed as secondary. Why? Because rabbis and midwives were the only people who had a hand in lifecycle events (and quite literally for midwives!). Midwives, in particular, had the ability to bring life into the world and in doing so, were responsible for the continuity of the Jewish people. Talk about pressure! And beyond that, a 14th century Hebrew version of Soranus' treatise on gynecology encouraged a midwife to be "God-fearing, respectable, learned, wise, intelligent, clean, innocent, strong, skillful and patient." To be a midwife is synonymous with being a "wise woman," says the Mishnah (2nd century). In fact, ancient midwives could tell the birther their expected due date simply by placing their hands on the birther's belly. Every Jewish community had a midwife, or group of midwives, who helped women through their pregnancies, births, and postpartum journeys.

The role of midwives began to transform (and unfortunately, in most communities, disintegrate) with the transfer of childbirth to hospital maternity wards at the turn of the century. For more on the topic of this major societal transition away from midwifery and toward hospital birth and OB/GYN care, I highly recommend the films *The Business of Being Born* (2008), *Why Not Home* (2016), and *Birth Story: Ina May Gaskin and the Farm Midwives* (2012).

Ancient Birthing Tools

The Birthing Stool & Bricks

Exodus 1:16 actually mentions the use of a birth stool or bricks called "obnayim." Because we don't know exactly what these were, our most educated guess is that these birthing stools or bricks were used as the surface on which a baby was placed immediately after birth. Interestingly, the same word appears only one other time in the Tanakh. In Jeremiah 18:3, obnayim refers to a pottery wheel. How beautiful! The Tanakh is teaching us that a potter's wheel and the act of creating something from nothing is linked to human reproduction and our own ability to build and create life.



The Birthing Stool & Bricks (con't)

This stool and/or bricks were used to help the birther squat into a comfortable birthing position. Sometimes this equipment would be decorated with painted images or magical scenes. These were particularly popular in the Near East, Egypt, and in Hittite birth rituals. And believe it or not, if you work with a midwife for your modern birth today, you can request to use a birthing stool too!

The Birthing Stone

In ancient Israel, birthers would select a stone from outside to bring into their home (Granqvist, 61-62). When labor began, the stone was placed on the floor, covered with rags, and sprinkled with dust and earth. The birther would squat over the stone and once the baby was born, the dust and earth were used to sweep up any blood that had spilled onto the ground during birthing. It was then buried with the placenta.

II. Prayers for Labor and Delivery

Psalm 121: The Psalm of Ascents

I lift up my eyes to the mountains. What is the source of my help?
My help comes from Adonai, maker of heaven and earth.
God will not let your foot give way; your Protector will not slumber.
The Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps.
God is your guard, God is your protection close at hand.
The sun will not strike you by day nor the moon by night.
God will guard you from all harm.
God will guard your soul, your going and your coming, now and forever.

Psalm 126: A Song of Ascents

When God brought back the captives of Zion, we were like dreamers.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter and our tongue with singing, then
they said among the nations, "God has done great things for them."
God has done great things for us; we are glad.
Turn our captivity, O God, like the springs in the desert.
Those who sow in tears will reap in joy.
One who goes weeping on their way, bearing a bag of seed, shall come
back with a joyful shout carrying his sheaves.



A Prayer For Deliverance

(from "Out of the Depths I Call to You:
A Book of Prayers for the Married Jewish Woman")

Open the wall of my womb so that I may bear at the proper time this child who is within me- at a time of blessing and salvation.

May this child be vital and healthy.

May I not struggle only to achieve emptiness, may I not labor in vain, God forbid. Because You alone hold the key to life, as it is written,

"And God remembered Rachel and listened to her and opened her womb" (Genesis 30:22).

Therefore take pity on my entreaty.

From the very depths of my heart I call to You. I raise my voice to You, God. Answer me from the heights of your holiness. Selah.

Prayer to the Divine Midwife

(from The Reconstructionist Rabbi's Manual)

May The Deliverer, who in times of trouble answers those who call for divine help, accept my prayer as I struggle in labor. With graciousness as deep and as wide as the sea, God remembered my mothers and blessed them with children. So may God remember and tend to me now. Through these labor pains my heart trembles and calls out. My gaze is fixed upon the Eternal, my God. My hand reaches for the divine midwife whose tender care will help me through my sore distress. My God see my pain, and remember my tears, and grant my petition. May my prayer be welcome, and may I be granted relief and comfort. The Merciful One will deliver me. The Compassionate One will return my health and vigor and well-being. The Kind One will restore my former strength.

My body will be refreshed anew.

Kavanot (Intentions) for Labor & Delivery

Tze Atah v'khol ha'am asher b'raglekha, v'acharei-chein eitze.

"Leave, you and all the people who follow you, and after that I will go..."

(Exodus 11:8)

Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od. V'ha'ikar lo lefached klal.

The world is a very narrow bridge. The most important thing is not to be afraid.

(attributed to the Hasidic rabbi Nachman of Breslov)

Kol haneshama t'halleil Yah, Halleluyah!

Let every breath praise God, Hallelujah!

(Psalm 150:6)



Blessings Immediately Following Delivery

Hatov V'hameitiv (from the weekday Amidah prayer).

Barukh atah Adonai, eloheinu melekh ha'olam, hatov v'hameitiv.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, Who is good and does good.

Shehekheyanu (believed to have emerged in the Middle Ages).

*Barukh atah Adonai, eloheinu melekh ha'olam, shehecheyanu, v'kiymanu,
v'higyanu, lazman hazeh.*

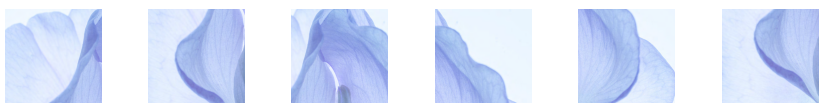
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, Who gives us life, sustains us, and enables us to reach this moment.

iii. Spiritual Care for the Birther

In the initial moments after birth, you may be feeling hundreds of different emotions all at once. Or, you may find yourself in complete shock, not feeling much of anything at all. Both ends of the spectrum are completely normal and expected. Wherever your mind might be in those early moments with little one in your arms (or on your chest), it is helpful to have someone else there with you to reinforce and remember your immediate postpartum desires. If you share your hopes or plans for what spiritual experience you'd like in advance, then during these moments, your birth partner or doula or midwife or OB/GYN can help give those moments to you. Communication and planning are key. For example, I wanted to recite a blessing of gratitude for our son and my birth experience and our safety when they put my son in my arms for the first time. In the midst of all the excitement and chaos in the delivery room, I nearly forgot that I had wanted that! Thankfully, my husband had the blessing in his pocket (that I had given him at the very start of my labor) and he remembered to take it out and recite it so our moment of spiritual connection and gratitude could come to life.

In ancient times, midwives would recite prayers for the birther during labor and immediately afterward. You'll find some of the prayers that were traditionally recited in Chapter 6, Section II. If you resonate with one in particular, consider asking your doula or support person to recite the prayer for you while you are in labor and immediately after delivery.

Most importantly, to ensure that you feel spiritually cared for as a birther, speak up for what is important to you and take it slow. There is no rush in your birth process (as much as you want to meet your baby as quickly as possible!). You only have the chance to birth this child one time. Breathe deeply. Open your heart and mind fully. Relax your body completely. And embrace the miracle that is your birth.



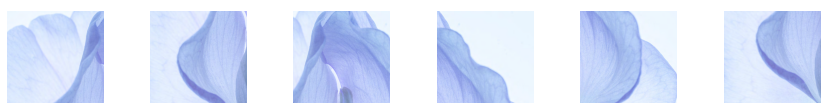
IV. Reflection Opportunity

Which ancient birthing methods peak your interest? Would you be interested in experimenting with a certain position or piece of ancient “equipment” during your birth experience?

Take a moment to brainstorm your own blessing for someone to recite for you during labor. What would your blessing be?

Take a moment to brainstorm your own blessing to recite immediately after giving birth, with your new little one by your side. What would your blessing be?

What are some ways you are preparing to spiritually care for yourself during your labor? How can others help to hold you accountable to performing those spiritual acts?



Chapter 7

Welcoming Baby and Parent



*"Each person has three names:
one that their parents give them,
one that others call them,
and the name that they
acquire for themselves."*

Ecclesiastes Rabbah

I. The Significance of Choosing a Hebrew Name for Your Baby

A Hebrew name is a keystone of Jewish identity. In the *Kabbalah*, it is explained that the 22 sacred letters of the Hebrew *alef-bet* are the spiritual “building blocks” of all created reality. The name of a thing in the Holy Tongue represents a combination of sacred letters that reflects its purpose and role toward which it was created. All the more so, a Hebrew name is a spiritual marker that embodies a person’s unique character traits and God-given gifts. A Hebrew name functions as a conduit, channeling spiritual energy from God into a person’s body and soul. It is also the name that your child will use when they become a “B Mitzvah” (a more inclusive term for the Jewish rite of passage known as a Bar or Bat Mitzvah), get married beneath their wedding chuppah, and many other lifecycle events as well as anytime they are called up to the bimah in prayer settings. A Hebrew name is a big deal, and by bestowing one upon your baby, you are connecting them to their Jewish ancestors and to the deepest parts of themselves.

When you land on the perfect name for your baby, our Sages say that it is the result of angels of God gently and subconsciously guiding you toward it. The name was predestined to be “the one” for the little soul you are creating. This is also why many traditional or more observant Jewish parents wait until they see their little one’s face for the first time to select a name: it is believed that the right name enters your heart when you finally see your baby’s mannerisms and appearance. In some Jewish communities, a name isn’t even finalized until the day of the bris or baby naming (that’s right... sometimes their name is up in the air for several days!). Another reason why a baby’s name is sometimes kept secret until the day of their baby naming, or *Brit Milah*, is in order to protect the baby from Lilith (see Chapter 7, part II) or the evil eye. If evil spirits do not know the name of the newborn, they will be unable to call the newborn toward them to take them. In modern times, this tradition is still followed for this reason... in addition to the protection from nosy family members who might give you unsolicited comments about the baby’s name (or, God forbid, pressure you to change the baby’s name) prior to the *Brit Milah*! Yikes. Our Jewish tradition realizes the emotion and weight that comes with selecting a name and always finds ways to protect the parents and child, whether from evil spirits or icky comments from acquaintances.

So how do you go about selecting the right Hebrew name for your baby? Well, let’s start with the basics. Some parents choose to name their baby the same name in both English and Hebrew. For example, if you select the name Rachel, your baby’s name in Hebrew might be... Rachel, or perhaps Rochel (in Yiddish)! Similarly, if you name your baby Solomon, the Hebrew word for Solomon is Shlomo. So, as you can see, sometimes you don’t need to brainstorm a Hebrew name at all because there already exists a correlating Hebrew name. However, many parents today choose more Americanized or modern names that don’t necessarily have Hebrew “matches.” For example, if you name your baby Hazel or Charlotte or Jackson, then what would the Hebrew name be? Here is where you can use your creative juices:

Hazel could follow the “Ha” or the “Ch” sounds in Hebrew. So for example, a Hebrew name for Hazel might be Hadara or Haviel.

Charlotte could follow the “Sh” or the “Ch” sounds in Hebrew. So for example, a Hebrew name for Charlotte might be Shira or Chana.

Jackson could follow the “Y” sound in Hebrew, since there is no “J” Hebrew equivalent. So for example, a Hebrew name for Jackson might be Yirimiyahu (Jeremiah), Yirimaya, Yochanan, or Yonatan (Jonathan).



And then, of course, there are Jewish parents who just do not feel attached to a Hebrew name that corresponds with their child's English name, or, there are Jewish parents who are looking to include one more late grandparent or great-grandparent to their baby's name. These are the cases where you might see baby boy Oliver Justin Katzberg with the Hebrew name Moshe David!

Whatever you choose to name your baby, make sure it is a name you absolutely love and holds deep significance to you.

II. Ancient Customs Around Baby Naming

The act of naming a baby has always been a big deal in the Jewish community. It's not some modern excuse to throw a bagel and lox brunch. Some of the most significant stories in the Torah include the choosing, or the changing of, a name. When Abraham and Sarah became the first Jews, their names changed from Avram and Sarai. When Jacob wrestled with an angel of God, he received the name Yisrael. When we first encounter Queen Esther in the *Purim megillah*, her name is Hadassah.

Because names matter so much, the customs surrounding baby namings are endless. Different ancient communities had very different looking practices. But, by and large, superstition abounded. In most ancient communities, it was traditional to withhold the name of the baby (or sometimes not even think of what to name the baby) until the baby's *bris*, if the baby were male, or until the first Torah reading day of that week, if the baby were female. In many Jewish communities, this practice still exists today (see the following section for more details on modern rituals and traditions).

III. Modern Day Rituals Around Baby Naming

Today there are many different ways to refer to a Jewish baby naming (and by the way, did you know that the first known baby naming ceremony for a girl wasn't officially published until 1973?! Psh!). Here are just a few options:

Brit bat — *Brit bat* means a "covenant of the daughter" in Hebrew.

Simchat bat — *Simchat bat* means "joy of the daughter" in Hebrew, it's usually used in Ashkenazi communities for a girl's naming ceremony.

Zeved Habat — *Zeved Habat* means "gift of the daughter." It's a Sephardic baby naming ritual that is usually held in a synagogue within the first month of life.

Brit ben — *Brit ben* means a "covenant of the son" in Hebrew.

Brit shalom — *Brit shalom* means a "covenant of peace" in Hebrew.

Brit chayim — *Brit chayim* means a "covenant of life" in Hebrew.

Brit tikkun — *Brit tikkun* means a "covenant of reparation" in Hebrew.



In modern times, baby namings are held in a variety of places: be it a synagogue, the parent's or grandparent's home, a public park, and sometimes even the party room of a Kosher restaurant! Below are some modern rituals that people in the Jewish community have coined and utilized in their baby naming ceremonies today:

- Immersing the baby in water (with your pediatrician's permission) to symbolize the *mikveh*.
- Washing the baby's feet to symbolize the welcoming of guests, as Abraham did in the Bible.
- Wrapping the baby in a *tallis*, or touching a baby's lips to a *klaf* (a sacred scroll, often the one found in a *mezuzah*) to welcome the baby into Jewish life.
- Some parents circle their baby seven times to symbolically bring their baby into the covenant. This mimics the traditional practice at a wedding ceremony, when the bride circles the groom seven times as they join together in covenant with God.
- Families may recite seven blessings to welcome their baby, parallel to the seven blessings (*sheva berakhot*) which sanctify a Jewish wedding. These birth ritual blessings often include the blessing over wine and the *shehecheyanu* blessing (which marks any new occasion)
- Hold the naming ceremony beneath a *chuppah/Tallit* (option to invite beloved family members to hold up each side of the *chuppah/Tallit*)
- Anoint your baby with gentle oil, which evokes the biblical practice of anointing kings and priests. Anointing a baby can represent a blessing for plenty, in keeping with the verse from Ecclesiastes, "Let your clothes always be freshly washed and your head never lacking ointment," and the famous *Psalm 23*, "You anoint my head with oil, my drink is abundant." Anointing is also associated with love in *Song of Songs*, "Your ointments yield a sweet fragrance, your name is like finest oil, therefore do maidens love you."
- Parents, older siblings or beloved relatives present Jewishly meaningful gifts to the baby, like a *tzedakah* box, *kiddush* cup or candlesticks.



IV. Lilith

The myth of Lilith speaks to the real fear that exists, not just in ancient times, but still in modern times too, about the perils of childbirth. Lilith is rooted in rabbinic commentary, biblical exegesis, Hebrew literature, mystical prayer books, and yes, old wives' tales. The notion of a demon-like "baby snatcher" who lurks near birther's homes and babies began in non-Jewish cultures, but soon developed within Jewish circles and acquired Jewish traits.

The story (presumably from the early rabbinic period) goes that Lilith was created at the same time Adam, the first man, was created. Like her Mesopotamian counterpart Lamashtu, Lilith was pushed aside and left without a husband. Desiring children, she roams the Earth looking for a way to have a baby on her own. Of course in ancient times, this meant stealing a baby.

Throughout the ages, incantations and amulets were believed to dispel Lilith and dissuade her from harming mother and baby. Lilith is believed to be at her most dangerous in the first weeks and months after a baby is born.

Ok, but come on.

Seriously.

Thinking about this female "demon" snatching babies from innocent new mothers is the last thing we want to be thinking about during our pregnancies and postpartum periods. Just like many, many, many other stories within our ancient tradition, there are layers of misogyny and dust to sweep away. What happens if we reclaim Lilith? Instead of fearing other women during this vulnerable time in our lives, what might it mean to embrace each other without anxiety but with deep care and concern?

Modern Jewish scholars and feminists have seized upon Lilith's assertion of equality because, unlike Eve, she was created as Adam's equal. As Lilly Rivlin writes in her "Afterword," "In the late twentieth century, self-sufficient women, inspired by the women's movement, have adopted the Lilith myth as their own. They have transformed her into a female symbol for autonomy, sexual choice, and control of one's own destiny." Further, American Judaism's only feminist magazine is called "Lilith," and there was even a festival in the 1990's called "The Lilith Fair."



To lift up the voice of the “good” Lilith, the Lilith many of us now embrace and do not fear, the Lilith we befriend and enjoy the company of, here is a powerful poem reenvisioning Lilith in modern times:

LILITH by Enid Dame

kicked myself out of paradise
left a hole in the morning
no note no goodbye

the man I lived with
was patient and hairy
he cared for the animals

worked late at night
planting vegetables
under the moon

sometimes he'd hold me
our long hair tangled
he kept me from rolling

off the planet
it was
always safe there

but safety
wasn't enough. I kept nagging
pointing out flaws

in his logic
he carried a god
around in his pocket

consulted it like
a watch or an almanac

it always proved
I was wrong

two against one
isn't fair! I cried
and stormed out of Eden
into history:

the Middle Ages
were sort of fun
they called me a witch

I kept dropping
in and out
of peoples sexual fantasies

now

I work in New Jersey
take art lessons
live with a cab driver

he says, baby
what I like about you
is your sense of humor

sometimes
I cry in the bathroom
remembering Eden
and the man and the god
I couldn't live with



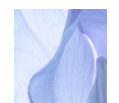
V. Reflection Opportunity

What is your personal belief about Lilith or other postpartum superstitions in Jewish tradition or otherwise?

Envision your ideal Jewish baby naming/welcoming ceremony. What does it look like? What steps can you take to ensure others can help you achieve this vision?

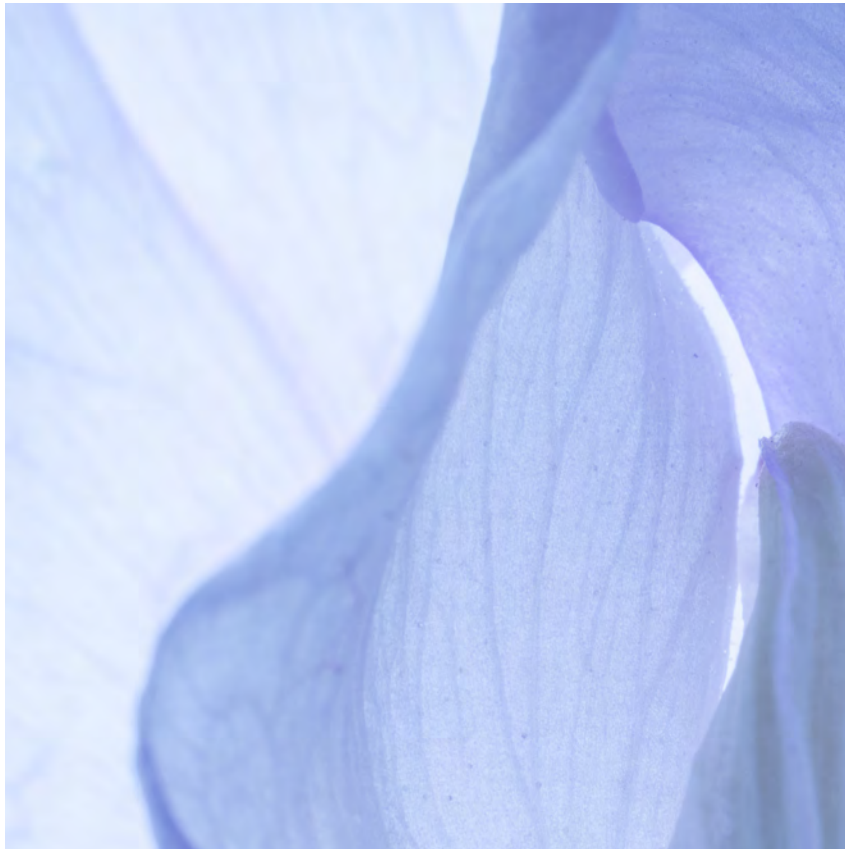
What is the most important memory or message you want your child to understand about the meaning of their name?

Use the space below to jot down some favorite English and/or Hebrew baby names you've been contemplating. Even if you don't end up choosing a name, use the space below as a snapshot into your mind and heart at this very moment in time.



Chapter 8

Making Postpartum Jewishly Meaningful



*"You drew me from the womb, kept
me safe at my mother's breast"*

Psalms 22:11

I. Ancient Jewish Tradition and Rituals Around Postpartum

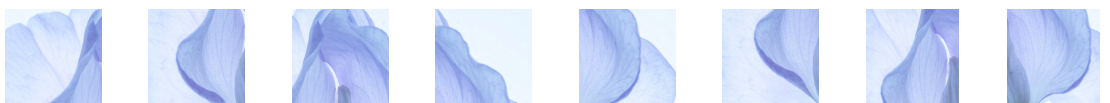
During the labor and delivery of my firstborn, my husband and I intentionally chose to put all screens and technology aside so we could be fully present in the miracle that was unfolding before our eyes. For us, this was instrumental in creating a cherished moment and memory of intense marital bonding. But for my parents, patiently waiting for hours next to their phones for updates or a picture of a healthy baby, this was pure torture. When I asked my parents what they were thinking and how they were feeling when they could not reach us, they responded, “it’s simple. We thought you had died!”

As parents, we are no strangers to visiting the absolute worst case scenario in our minds when we cannot reach our loved ones. And while, thankfully, my parents were wrong on this one, they are correct in their awareness of the fatality that childbirth sometimes presents... especially in America.

In ancient times, this was a well-known fact. Childbirth was a time in a woman’s life when those near to her feared that she very well might pass. Further, once the baby is finally in the mother’s arms, the danger is still present... perhaps even more present. The Talmud (*Eruvin* 41b, *Sefer Ha-toledet*) references a fever that sometimes occurs in the mother after childbirth and suggests that it may be from the mother becoming cold during her labor. While we know this is not the reason for maternal fatality today, the rabbis were correct in noticing the importance of attending to the mother in the hours and days and months immediately after birth (*Tractate Shabbat* 129b). Severe bleeding is remedied in the Talmud through a potion (*Eruvin* 41b, *Sefer Ha-toledet*). And midwives, in an effort to slow bleeding and bring comfort to the birther’s body, would engage in body-wrapping (a postpartum art form that is reappearing in some postpartum doula practices today).

In rabbinic times, whenever the mother felt strong enough to leave her home (which, in most cases, was not sooner than the first forty days), the mother was encouraged to attend synagogue and recite a prayer of gratitude to God from delivering her from danger called *Birkat HaGomel* (see Chapter 8, Part VI), Psalm 116, and a prayer for her newborn and the person she hopes they will grow into.

Were there any particularly Jewish materials associated with postpartum? Of course there were! Swaddling cloths, or receiving blankets, have been in use since ancient times. But, beginning in the early 15th century, these swaddles gained even more meaning and were sometimes referred to as a “*wimpl*” in Yiddish or a “*mappah*” in Hebrew. Here’s how the story goes: a couple came to synagogue for the *brit milah* of their newborn but in their excitement and naivete, they had forgotten to bring a swaddling cloth! The Rabbi looked around the synagogue and suggested using the cloth belt that wraps around the Torah scroll. The new parents worried about getting blood on the Torah belt (which would render it impure and prohibit it from further use), but the Rabbi instructed they launder it several times to remove any blood so the belt could be used on the Torah once again. Necessity breeds invention! Eventually, this became a trend within Jewish communities throughout the world. Swaddling cloths used to wrap the newborn baby immediately following delivery were then used again at the baby’s *brit milah*. After the *brit milah*, the swaddle was cut into four long strips, sewn together, and then gifted to the synagogue to be used to bind a Torah scroll. This beautiful tradition still lives today. *Wimpls* often contain the baby’s Hebrew name, date of birth, colorful motifs (sometimes including zodiac signs), and meaningful inscriptions. In the 17th century, it was tradition in Eastern Europe for the birther to embroider the *wimpl* herself as she recovered in bed postpartum. On the child’s first birthday, the child would deliver their *wimpl* to the synagogue themselves. If the child hesitates or cries when handing the *wimpl* to the rabbi or congregant, it was believed the child would grow to be a learned Torah scholar.



In ancient Mesopotamia, lullabies were another postpartum staple in the first week (and beyond) of a baby's life. As for ancient Israel specifically, there is no record of specific ancient lullabies, though we can assume ancient Israelites caught onto this trend and employed it themselves in their own newborn care practices. They were an outlet for the birther to express her fears, frustrations (in a healthy way!), and hopes for the future of her child. Some lyrics to these melodies even included national aspirations for the Jewish people. Other lullabies included ballad-like stories of Elijah the Prophet, angels who protected the baby, and even songful explanations of the circumcision ceremony. Sephardic Jews particularly enjoyed singing songs to the newborn about the birth of the prophet Abraham. Two of the most popular melodies in more modern times is a Yiddish lullaby by Abraham Goldfaden called *Rozhinkes mit Mandlen* ("Raisins and Almonds") about a mother dreaming of her son as a Torah scholar, and a Yiddish lullaby by M.M. Warshawsky called *Oyfn Pripetshik* ("On the Hearth") that recalls the story of a rabbi teaching his young students the aleph-bet.

II. Ancient Support Systems and Community

The Talmud addresses this by teaching that a woman must be treated as if she is a deathly ill person for the first thirty days after giving birth. This not only frees her from any non-time-bound *mitzvot* she may have otherwise needed to perform, but it also ensures that a community of people will be at-the-ready to tend to her needs and support her healing process. Who might that community of people be? Those women were likely her midwives, her family members, her friends, and her neighbors (not unlike the folks in your life who might help create a Meal Train for you if you were in need). It was the job of these women to ensure that the new mother's room remained warm at all times, that she had warm food prepared for her constantly, and that there was always someone present to help take care of the baby. You may be noticing that a foundational difference between ancient postpartum and modern postpartum is that the new mother was *rarely* left alone to "figure things out" herself. There was always support. There was always a helping hand. There was always a community of people tending to the housework and other chores as a rotating team. Beginning in medieval times, Jewish communities organized to form societies of women that would volunteer to offer this type of community help for a mother who had recently given birth.

III. Nutrition

After you have given birth, your body goes from a full state to an empty state. Your womb was full, brimming with life and growth, and now it is back to its original form of both emptiness and potential. This mega physical and spiritual transition sometimes creates an inner imbalance that has the potential to leave you feeling colder, hungrier, and drier than usual. These *real* feelings also contribute to a birther's anxiety levels. And we don't want added anxiety! This surge from full to empty, from high to low is something that can be kept more balanced by being mindful of your nutritional intake after birth. And because our physical needs often mirror our spiritual needs, Judaism has much to say on the topic of postpartum nutrition.

Ancient midwives would nurture the postpartum mother with foods that were heavy, warm, oily, smooth, and stable. This also included regular oil massages with calming herbs (sign me up!!). Cold foods (like salads or sandwiches or ice cream) are generally frowned upon in the early postpartum days because they do not provide a warming, heavy balance to the birther's body and spirit. Think: what foods feel like a weighted blanket to my soul? If you use this visual, you'll be on the right track to nourishing yourself properly after giving birth. By nourishing the mother's body, they enabled her mind and being to also heal, which allowed the birther to take her form as a mother.



Incorporating the Seven Species into Your Diet

Developing a relationship with the 7 species of Israel, also known as the 7 sacred species, may also bring you comfort and meaning during your postpartum period. These foods all grow wild in Israel and ripen in different seasons throughout the year, just as the year causes different parts of ourselves to “ripen” or come to fruition at different times. The 7 species (and their spiritual and postpartum significance) include:

Wheat

Spiritual: represents the endeavor to nourish what is distinctly human in us, to feed the divine aspirations that are the essence of our humanity

Postpartum: honor the Divine healing of your body and the very God-like but also very human act you just experienced in giving birth to life

Barley

Spiritual: represents the endeavor to nourish and develop our animal soul

Postpartum: honor your animalistic needs, give your body what it physically wants and decline any physicality that does not suit you in this moment

Grapes

Spiritual: represents joy, which adds depth, color, and intensity to everything we do

Postpartum: Allow yourself to experience joy and happiness. Everything else can wait.

Figs

Spiritual: represents our capacity for a deep and intimate involvement in our every positive endeavor—an involvement which signifies that we are one with what we are doing

Postpartum: Be present with your new baby, with your new body, with your new self.

Olives

Spiritual: Just like an olive, say our sages, which yields its oil only when pressed, so, too, do we yield what is best in us only when pressed between the millstones of life

Postpartum: This is hard and you can do hard things. Cherish the challenge and know that enriching lessons and new skills will emerge with each passing day.

Dates

Spiritual: represents tranquility—the product of a soul whose every aspect and nuance of character has been refined and brought into harmony with oneself

Postpartum: Realize that it is perfectly ok to feel disharmony within yourself during this time. There is a certain harmony to your disharmony. Tranquility will come and go in your environment. Practice maintaining it in your heart and mind.

Pomegranates

Spiritual: Represents the paradox of how an individual may be empty and, at the same time, be full

Postpartum: Your body was recently full. Now it is empty. It is ok to mourn this transition. Fill yourself in other ways: with warm food, with love, with friends and family, with moments that bring you peace.



Postpartum Jewish Recipes

Kitchari or **Kitrchi**, is a common dish both in India and the SWANA region; Jews of Iraq eat Kitchri to heal from illnesses, and also to break fasts because it is gentle on the stomach. It is grounding and warming and a perfect consistency for a person in postpartum. While it contains lentils, they do not cause gas because they are pre-soaked. Additionally, the version I make uses the Ayurvedic concept of low acidity in early postpartum so it does not include tomatoes or irritating vegetables like onion and garlic. Later in postpartum, these may be added and the soup can be prepared with less liquid as well.

Ingredients

1 cup basmati rice
½ cup split mung dahl
6 - 8 cups water (add more water if earlier in postpartum)
1 ½ cups chopped sweet potatoes (kale is optional)
3 tbsp ghee (or sesame oil or both)
1 tsp yellow or brown mustard seeds
½ tsp each: ground cumin, cinnamon, turmeric, fenugreek, cardamom, cloves
1 tbsp salt
1 inch ginger root or 1 tsp ginger powder
Sea salt

Instructions

1. Soak the lentils and rice 30 minutes- 2 hours. Rinse til water runs clear
2. In a heavy bottom pot, sautee the mustard seeds in oil/ ghee until they pop (be careful- they burn easily-- don't let them get black!)
3. Add the spices, letting them become part of the oil
4. Add garlic knob
5. Add chopped up sweet potatoes, coating in the spiced oil
6. Add salt
7. Drain the rice/ lentil. Add the rice/ lentils and coat in oil
8. Cover everything in water and add some salt
9. Cook until lentils and rice are cooked through
10. Add kale, cook 2 minutes

Serve with extra ghee. This recipe can be frozen but I would leave out the kale if you are doing that and add it when you plan to actually eat it as Kale does not freeze as well.



Classic Chicken Soup (adapted from Quick & Kosher by Jamie Geller)

This Jewish classic is a notorious healer of all things from a runny nose to a broken heart to mending your postpartum body. Everyone tends to have their own version of this delicacy (with Matzo Balls or without!), so feel free to experiment and don't forget to call a family member to ask what their secret is (or any other family recipes for that matter)! Here's a basic recipe you can build off.

Ingredients

1 (3½-pound) chicken, cut into 8 pieces
12 cups water
1 large carrot, peeled, cut into bite-sized pieces
1 large parsnip, peeled, cut into bite-sized pieces
1 large onion, cut into bite-sized pieces
1 large turnip, peeled, cut into bite-sized pieces
4 medium stalks of celery, cut into bite-sized pieces
3 tablespoons kosher salt
1 (½-ounce) chicken consommé stock cube (optional)
1 bouquet garnish of 15 parsley sprigs, 15 dill sprigs, 1 tablespoon whole peppercorns
Additional fresh parsley or dill, for garnish (optional)

Instructions

1. Rinse chicken and place in a 6-quart soup pot.
2. Add water and bring to a boil over high heat. Skim any foam, residue or fat that rises to the surface using a large spoon or skimmer and discard.
3. Once boiling runs clear, reduce heat to a simmer and add carrot, parsnip, onion, turnip, celery and salt. Add stock cube, if desired.
4. Simmer, covered, for 1 hour and 30 minutes. During the last 15 minutes of cooking add the bouquet garni and then remove before serving.
5. Remove chicken meat from the bones and place a few pieces into each bowl. Ladle soup and vegetables over chicken.
6. Mince dill or parsley and sprinkle on immediately before serving, if desired. Or cool the soup and refrigerate overnight.



Classic Cholent (adapted from Melinda Strauss)

This version of cholent is the perfect classic dish so many Ashkenazim grew up with. Cholent is a dish of rich, heavy, warm bites (a.k.a. pure comfort for a new mama). This dish is incredibly easy and fills the house with a warm, meaty aroma. Did you know the slow cooker was invented by a Jew because of cholent?

Ingredients

2 yellow onions, chopped
2 small potatoes, cubed
2 pounds beef stew meat, cubed
2-4 marrow bones, optional
1 cup pearl barley
½ cup kidney beans
1 tablespoon paprika
1 teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon turmeric
½ teaspoon chili powder
2 tablespoons honey
1 kishka, optional
3-4 cups of water
Salt and pepper to taste

Instructions

1. Place the onions and potatoes in the bottom of the slow cooker.
2. Top with the beef stew meat and marrow bones. Sprinkle the meat with salt and pepper. Add the barley and kidney beans, then sprinkle on the paprika, cumin, turmeric and chili powder.
3. Drizzle the top of the cholent with honey, top with the kishka, then pour the water over the top to cover the beans. Cover the slow cooker and cook on low heat overnight, or for at least 8 hours.

Mamaliga (adapted from The Spruce Eats)

Similar to polenta, Romanian cornmeal porridge, or mămăligă, is an ancient dish that began as peasant food and is now served at fine restaurants and to postpartum mamas. It is a warming, filling dish with Ashkenazic roots. Want to add meat to this dish (not Kosher, but super tasty!)? Combining lamb, ginger, cinnamon, cumin, tomatoes, garlic, and lemon juice adds even more warmth to this dish.

Ingredients

3 1/2 cups water
1 1/2 teaspoons kosher salt, or to taste
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 cup coarse yellow cornmeal
Sour cream, optional
Telemea, or feta cheese, optional
Fresh herbs of choice, optional

Instructions

1. Bring the water to a rolling boil. Add the salt and butter, stirring to melt.
2. Using a wooden spoon, add the cornmeal very gradually, while stirring constantly in the same direction.
3. Simmer over low heat, stirring frequently, until it thickens and starts to pull away from the sides of the pot, about 35 to 40 minutes.
4. Serve hot with sour cream, cheese, and/or herbs if you prefer.



IV. Impurity & Mikveh

As discussed previously, the postpartum period is a vulnerable time in a birther's journey, often including strong emotional releases due to the sudden decrease in hormones the body no longer needs to produce. This phase is accompanied by bleeding, as the body recovers from its dramatic event of pregnancy and birth. As your healthcare provider will (hopefully) inform you, this particular type of bleeding, called lochia, may last anywhere from two weeks to two months, and may also come and go depending on your level of physical activity. This is why it is so important to rest your body as much as possible during postpartum, never lifting heavy objects (or toddlers!) or expending unnecessary energy (that home renovation project you've always wanted to complete can wait, even if you get sudden bursts of energy!). Ensuring you have carved out proper time for your body to rest and be still will help the postpartum bleeding equalize or subside sooner. The median length of time postpartum bleeding lasts is 36 days (double-chai, how cool?!). Though you may not feel it, this time period is just as holy as the months you carried life. Your body deserves all the love that you gave it (and perhaps even more!) as when it excitedly grew with your baby inside. This too is a beautiful part of your journey.

The Torah includes many, many sections on what renders a person "unclean" and how to undergo purification to return to a state of ritual "cleanliness" or "purity." To be clear, in modern terms, nothing about you is "unclean," though you may sometimes feel that way between the endless postpartum supplies, witch hazel, and homemade "padsicles." But as you may or may not know, anything with blood seriously freaked out our ancient rabbis... and anyone in the ancient world for that matter. Possibly because they were a bunch of men (who don't bleed once a month), unaccustomed to seeing or experiencing blood. But also because, even today, we associate blood with loss and we try, in our attempt to continuously choose life and live it to the fullest, to distance ourselves from it. From this, we may understand many aspects of separation in our Jewish tradition, including laws of *Kashrut* (keeping Kosher), why some synagogues separate men and women during prayer using a *mechitzah*, the *Havdalah* ceremony separating the end of Shabbat from the beginning of the new week, practices around handling a *met/meitah* (the body of a deceased person) during a *taharah* (ritual purification of the deceased), and my personal favorite... use of the *mikveh*. An entire tractate of Mishnah and Talmud is devoted to discussing the *mikveh*, including a whole chapter on *mikveh* use after childbirth!

The *mikveh* is usually bath-tub-like in appearance, filled with flowing or "living" natural water known as *mayim chayim*. The *mikveh* is usually used after a specified time, like menstruation and postpartum, for women or before the high holidays or other significant occasions like a wedding day for men. In Orthodox Jewish communities, the *mikveh* is a communal centerpiece, preserving the ritual rhythm and life of all of its members. In other denominations of Judaism, the *mikveh* is just as important but used more sporadically throughout life (mostly for processes like conversion ceremonies, before marriage, after overcoming a major life event, or to mark an identity change).

Though today the *mikveh* is being used in creative, innovative new ways, *mikveh* immersion is one of the most ancient rituals our Jewish tradition offers. Ancient *mikvot* can be found throughout excavation sites in Israel and Jewish diasporic locations. The most recent ancient *mikveh* was discovered in northern Israel, dating back 2,000 years!



So what does *mikveh* use during postpartum look like? The answer truly is... however you'd like. Some birthers do not immerse themselves in the *mikveh* at all. Some birthers choose to immerse based on the traditional period of time (at least 40 days after birth of a boy or at least 80 days after birth of a girl). Some birthers immerse on the one year birthday of their baby, celebrating making it through the first 365 days. Some pregnant parents-to-be immerse in the 9th month of their pregnancy, preparing themselves to enter into parenthood or the next chapter of parenthood (if they are already blessed with children). In this last example, sometimes a couple that is wanting to begin trying for a baby or is having difficulty in conceiving may use the *mikveh* immediately after the pregnant immerser as it is believed that the *mikveh* water contains magical conceiving-properties.

The *mikveh* is one very Jewish avenue to enhance your relationship with your body and self, your relationship with your soul and God, and ritually mark a significant change in your life. Get creative, embrace the possibilities, and celebrate yourself through this deeply meaningful spa-like Jewish ritual that has been a staple of our tradition for thousands of years.

V. Postpartum Mood Disorder

Because our bodies are “in flux” during postpartum, we experience a wide variety of emotions alongside our healing. We might feel sad, empty, elated, euphoric, weepy, content, anxious, paranoid, extra loving, zombie-like, and everything and anything in between. Despite what your out-of-touch mother-in-law or your nosy neighbor may tell you, **all of these feelings are completely normal and expected**. Having an adorable, new bundle of love in your arms does not mean you will be happy and grateful 24/7. Those feelings of gratitude and deep love will be mixed into the batch of other emotions you'll be experiencing including mourning your “old life,” your pre-baby body, and even imposter syndrome (my husband and I repeatedly asked ourselves in those early weeks how on Earth the hospital could have possibly allowed us to simply walk out of their doors with a baby with no previous “training!”). We were horribly overwhelmed and stressed. Some folks call this collection of intense emotions “the baby blues.” It is completely normal for the baby blues to last for awhile. Most health providers will tell you that they may last up to two weeks after giving birth. However, I (in my completely non-medical opinion) think it is normal to feel this for up to three, sometimes four, weeks after birth. But, when is the baby blues something more serious?

If you experience serious thoughts of harming yourself, your baby, or others, it is no longer the baby blues and it is time to seek professional support (please find hotline numbers for support networks below, as well as in the resource section in the back of this workbook). Further, if you are experiencing depression beyond the initial first couple weeks after birth and/or your symptoms (like fear, anxiety, paranoia, anger, detachment, etc.) are severe enough to impact your ability to function on a daily basis, this may be postpartum depression.



The great news about all this? Postpartum depression is not only totally normal, but it is 100% treatable. It will pass, as long as you seek medical help. The support may come in the form of private counseling, support groups, and/or medication. Most birthers who took medication for their postpartum depression tapered off their meds within a few months. This is one very important area where we modern American women are deeply blessed in comparison to our ancient foremothers: we have modern medicine. Use it when needed. Know that it is not a crutch or a short-cut. Medicine can be a reparative tool for the healing of your body and mind, and you will feel like yourself again.

Some important resources for postpartum mental health support include:

Postpartum Support International

<https://www.postpartum.net/get-help/help-for-moms/>

Postpartum Progress

<https://postpartumprogress.com/>

Mother To Baby

<https://mothertobaby.org/>

National Suicide Prevention Hotline

<https://988lifeline.org/>

Your local Jewish Child and Family Services (JCFS)

Postpartum Education for Parents

<https://www.sbpep.org>



VI. Postpartum Prayers

Birkat HaGomel

(Note: this prayer is usually recited in a synagogue setting, as part of the Torah service. If reciting this in synagogue is of interest to you, you must request it from the service leader so they can include it in the service that day)

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, ha-gomel l'chayavim tovot she-g'malani kol tov.
Blessed are You, Lord our God, ruler of the world, who rewards the undeserving with goodness,
and who has rewarded me with goodness.

After the recitation of this blessing, the congregation responds:

Mi she-g'malcha kol tov, hu yi-g'malcha kol tov selah.

May God who rewarded you with all goodness reward you with all goodness for ever.

Psalm 116

(excerpt 116:5, 8-9)

“The Lord is gracious and beneficent; our God is compassionate.... You have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I shall walk before the Lord in the hands of the living.”

Psalm 100

A song for a thanksgiving offering. Shout to the Lord, all the earth.

Serve the Lord with joy, come before Him with praise.

Know that the Lord is God; He made us and we are His, people and the flock of His pasture.

Come into His gates with thanksgiving, [into] His courtyards with praise; give thanks to Him, bless His name.

For the Lord is good; His kindness is forever, and until generation after generation is His faith.

miz·mo·vr le·to·v·dah; ha·ri·'u la·shem kol·ha·'a·retz.

iv·du et·ha·shem be·sim·chah; bo·'u le·fa·nav bir·na·nah.

de·'u ki·ha·shem hu e·lo·him hu·a·sa·nu ve·lo ch ve·lov k a·nach·nu; am·mov ve·tzon mar·'i·tov.

bo·'u she·'a·rav be·to·v·dah cha·tze·ro·tav bit·hil·lah; ho·v·du·lov ba·ra·chu she·mov.

ki·to·vv ha·shem le·'o·v·lam chas·dov; ve·'ad·dor va·dor e·mu·na·tov.



Psalm 20

For the Choirmaster; a Psalm by David.

May the Lord answer you on the day of distress; may the Name of the G-d of Jacob fortify you.

May He send your help from the Sanctuary, and support you from Zion.

May He remember all your offerings, and always favorably accept your sacrifices.

May He grant you your heart's desire, and fulfill your every counsel.

We will rejoice in your deliverance, and raise our banners in the name of our God; may the Lord fulfill all your wishes.

Now I know that the Lord has delivered His anointed one, answering him from His holy heavens with the mighty saving power of His right hand.

Some (rely) upon chariots and some upon horses, but we [rely upon and] invoke the Name of the Lord our God.

They bend and fall, but we rise and stand firm.

Lord, deliver us; may the King answer us on the day we call.

Lam'na-tzay-ach mizmor l'dövid.

Ya-an'chö adonöy b'yom tzörö, y'sagev'chö shaym elohay ya-akov.

Yishlach ez-r'chö mi-kodesh, umi-tziyon yis-ödekö.

Yizkor köl min'cho-sechö, v'ölös'chö y'dash'neh selöh.

Yiten l'chö chil'vö-vechö, v'chöl atzös'chö y'ma-lay.

N'ran'nöh bishu-ösechö, uv'shaym elo-haynu nidgol, y'malay adonöy köl mish-alo-sechö.

Atöh yöda-ti, ki hoshi-a adonöy m'shi-cho, ya-anayhu mish'may köd-sho, big'vuros yay-sha y'mino.

Ayleh yö-rechev, v'ayleh va-susim, va-anachnu b'shaym adonöy elo-haynu naz-kir.

Hay-möh kör'u v'nöfölu, va-anachnu kam-nu vanis-odöd.

Adonöy ho-shi-öh, ha-melech ya-anaynu v'yom kör'aynu.

Psalm 118:5

(from Hallel)

From the narrow place I called out to God; God answered me with a vast expanse.

מִן־הַמֶּצָר קָרָאתִי יְהוָה עָנָנִי בְּמֶרְחָב יְהוָה

Min HaMetzar Karati Yah Anani Ba'merchav Yah



VII. Postpartum Checklist (adapted from “Natural Health After Birth: The Complete Guide to Postpartum Wellness by Dr. Aviva Romm)

- ☐ I am eating well, paying attention to my current nutritional needs as a postpartum mother
- ☐ I eat something fresh and natural every day
- ☐ I allow myself to rest when I’m tired
- ☐ I nap regularly or as often as I can
- ☐ I drink enough fluids daily
- ☐ I spend time in nature several times each week.
- ☐ I get enough sunlight most days of the week.
- ☐ I take good care of my physical health and get help for physical complaints.
- ☐ I take good care of my teeth
- ☐ I am connecting to my spirituality/my Judaism in personally meaningful ways
- ☐ I get regular exercise (check with your medical professional for what exercise is safe for you)
- ☐ I make time to enjoy beauty (music, art, nature) in my life.
- ☐ I take time to relax and enjoy my life.
- ☐ I regularly do things that bring me joy and satisfaction.
- ☐ I ask for help when I need it.
- ☐ I forgive myself when I make a mistake.
- ☐ I take time to laugh.
- ☐ I make time for friendships and other important relationships.

VIII. Ancient Weaning Rituals

The oldest known weaning ceremony takes place in the Torah when Abraham and Sarah threw a feast on the day Isaac was weaned. Hannah is another biblical person who marked the end of her breastfeeding journey by offering a prayer of gratitude to God after weaning Samuel. In ancient times, weaning was also significant because it meant the child would begin to spend more time with its father instead of being attached solely to its mother. With this, the child would be able to begin learning and watching how its father interacts with the world on a day-to-day basis, taking mental notes and mimicking the father’s behaviors. Even though the Torah marks this important event, weaning somehow never became a widespread Jewish ritual!

Some communities *do* mark this milestone, like Syrian and Iraqi Jews, celebrating with a huge bash serving sugary wheat and cinnamon treats. Why wheat? Wheat is traditionally a symbol of fertility... because often, a weaning ceremony meant the mother might soon try to conceive again.

In Eastern Europe, some communities marked the end of a baby’s dependence on nourishment from its mother by having a neighbor offer the baby solid food. If the baby consumed the food, the mother would recite a prayer that the child should always be self-sustaining. Sometimes the parents will donate *tzedakah* to a charity that fights hunger. No matter how weaning is marked, it is viewed as a celebration of the child’s growing independence.



IX. Modern Day Jewish Rituals and Ceremonies for Postpartum

In Israel today, there are certain ultra-Orthodox institutions that provide care facilities where mothers can rest with their newborns and heal before returning back home to their bustling families. “Lying-in” or the time spent in bed after giving birth is still a deeply sacred and important time of gratitude and healing in Judaism.

A traditional Yemenite Jewish women’s celebration, called *al-wafaa*, has also been revived in some modern Jewish communities. The ceremony celebrates a mother’s successful birthing of the baby she nurtured inside her for nine months and takes place after the first thirty days postpartum. The ceremony takes place in the evening in the home of the birther, often with Yemenite music in the background. Home-baked cakes, *ja’aleh* (roasted nuts and legumes), fruit, and candy are served. Dancing, drumming, celebratory snacking, and the sharing of birth stories ensues.

A *Simhat Yoledet*, or a celebration of the birth of a mother, is another modern ritual during the postpartum period. This ceremony also tends to take place in the birther’s home, organized by her closest family and friends, to celebrate her new identity as a mother. Separate from the baby’s *brit milah*, this party (that can truly look however you’d like!) takes place on *Rosh Chodesh*, a traditional “woman’s holiday” celebrating the new moon. The party-goers recite blessings and prayers for mother and baby, stock the mother’s fridge and freezer with meals, and sometimes study the themes of that particular Hebrew month together in a light-hearted and spirited celebration.

There are a lot of opportunities for celebrations with loved ones during the postpartum period. But if you are anything like me, when you’re subsiding off 3 hours of sleep and once-hot cups of coffee day in and day out, hosting and being bubbly with people is the last thing you’re in the mood for. There are plenty of other modern postpartum Jewish rituals that are more intimate. For example, one service I offer my clients is that of a 1:1 postpartum seder. When you think of a *seder*, your mind probably goes to Passover or *Tu B’Svat*, but this seder has a different feel. *Seder* literally translates to “order” and in a time when your life feels anything but orderly, this seder can be powerful and restorative. Using the 7 species of Israel, the *Havdalah* candle, and a piece of the weekly Torah portion as our guide, we create space for you to reflect on your birth experience, your spiritual well-being, and your relationship with yourself, your baby, and Judaism. There are many variations of this ceremony, and some even include a postpartum visit to the *mikveh* (see part IV).

Another simple yet protective and meaningful modern ritual is affixing Psalm 121, *Shir HaMaalot* (“A Song of Ascents”), to the inside of your front door. Traditionally, putting this psalm (even if it means printing it out at home and using some good ‘ole tape to hang it) on your door is believed to offer your home and your newborn additional protection. I kept Psalm 121 on my door for the first year of my son’s life, but you may choose to remove it once you feel your postpartum period has come to a conclusion (which may or may not coincide with when your parental leave ends, if you are working).



X. Reflection Opportunity

Who is in your postpartum “village?” Who can you turn to for help? List your helpers below.

Much of the postpartum period is about noticing changes and marking them in meaningful ways. What are some changes you anticipate experiencing and how do you feel about finding ways to notice them or celebrate them?

What would you like to add to your postpartum checklist?

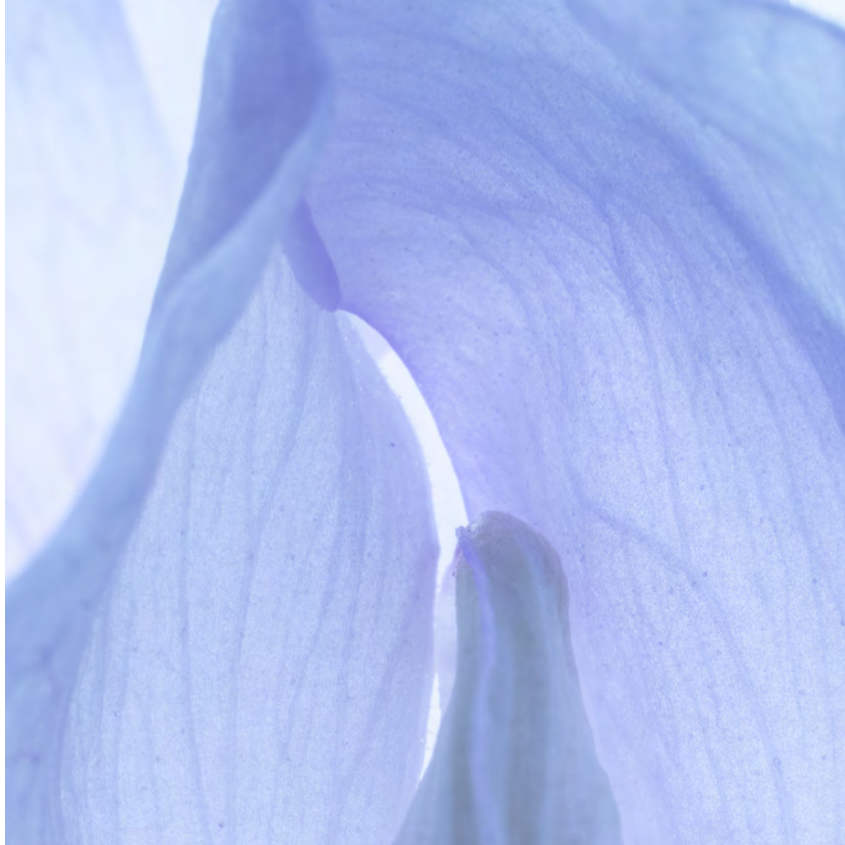
How do you plan to nourish your body and soul postpartum? Is there anything you should do now to prepare for that?

How might you ritualize your postpartum experience?



Chapter 9

Jewish Holidays and Their Birth Themes



"The river of life...flows from birth toward death. Day follows day with wearisome monotony... Only through the holidays does life experience the eternity of the river that returns to its source. Then life becomes eternal."

Franz Rosenzweig

Celebrating Jewish holidays and “living” the Jewish calendar is one of the most meaningful and impactful ways to uphold Judaism in your life. For Jewish parents, they may feel both a renewed sense of obligation and excitement to teach their children about these holidays and experience them in a new light. For children, learning about the Jewish holidays and celebrating them with family, friends, or the community can be a powerful catalyst in creating fun, loving Jewish memories that form the foundation of their Jewish identities and *neshamas*.

Many, if not all, of the Jewish holidays have connections to themes of birth, though some more literally than others. As your pregnant belly grows this year, consider studying about the upcoming holidays with an eye to themes of birthing and connecting to the Divine Feminine.

I. The Days of Awe

Holy Maternal Recipients

On Rosh HaShana, Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah were revisited by God and conceived children. (*Rosh Hashanah* 11a)

Shofar Use During Labor

The *piyut*, “*Et Shaarei Ratzon*,” is a powerful example of equating childbirth with the Days of Awe. It was written in the Medieval period in Fez, Morocco by Yehuda ibn Abbas and is traditionally sung on the first and second days of Rosh Hashanah before shofar blasts. It is also said when the ark is open during Yom Kippur *mincha* in some North African communities. According to the anecdotal research of Moshe bar Asher, a scholar of Hebrew language who is of Moroccan origin, the Moroccan women he spoke with described the use of this *piyut* in a number of ways during the process of labor and childbirth. When a woman went into labor and the midwives were called (or sometimes a bit beforehand), a rabbi, hazzan, and/or even a teenage boy who sang well were called into an adjacent room to that of the laboring woman to sing this *piyut* over and over with devotion until she gave birth. In the southeastern region of Tafilalt, Morocco, the singing of this *piyut* was also accompanied by shofar blowing if a woman was having a particularly difficult time. The shofar blower would go through the different blasts as he would on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur until the baby was born: *teki’ah, shevarim, teru’ah, teki’ah - teki’ah, shevarim, teki’ah - teki’ah, teru’ah, teki’ah*. As these blasts were happening, someone would sing the last verse of the *piyut* which mentions the shofar blast. (from Hebrew article: <http://old.piyut.org.il/articles/780.html>).

The Conception of the World

“Birth was understood as the end of a long process, one that was accompanied by pain, fear, and great danger. The birther was considered in great peril during birth, and every birth was accompanied by the threat of death. The hours during which a woman sat on the *mashber*, (the birthing stool) were both treacherous and perilous. As such, the hour of birth was, in a sense, a Day of Judgment. This idea is expressed clearly in a commentary on the *piyut* for New Year’s Day (Rosh haShana) “*HaYom Harat Olam*.”



The author writes: “HaYom Harat Olam” [Today is the conception of the world]—for all of man’s nourishment is meted out on Rosh haShana. Like a pregnant woman who conceives now and gives birth after time. For this is based on the verse “Like a woman with child, approaching childbirth, writhing and screaming in her pangs” (Isa. 26:17), so we are before you. For the world is impregnated with the deeds of people, good and bad, and on Rosh haShana all the deeds are accounted for and are judged and on that very day it is decreed whether to good or to bad. On that day the world is in peril until it is judged; just as a woman is in danger when she suffers in labor, so we cry out on that day...and on Rosh haShana the world is like a woman sitting on the birthing stool [mashber], and because a woman is pregnant for nine months, there are nine blessings on Rosh haShana.” (Baumgarten, *Elisheva. Mothers and Children : Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe*, Princeton University Press, 2007)

Shofar & Divine Breath

A Shofar with its narrow mouthpiece and wider opening resembles a birth canal. In fact, the Torah mentions a great woman with a related name, Shifra, who was a midwife to the children of Israel at the time of the birth of Moses in Egypt. Her name means to make beautiful, and that is what she did; she ensured that the babies would emerge healthy and viable, then swaddled and massaged them to foster their strength and beauty. The Shofar is the midwife of the new year. Into its piercing cry, we squeeze all of our heartfelt prayers, all of our tears, our very essence. All that exists resonates with its call until it reaches the very beginning, the cosmic womb. And there it touches upon High: the Divine Presence shifts modalities from transcendence to immanence, from strict judgment to compassion. The flow of energy into the world is similar to breath, a Divine exhale, filling creation and then immediately, as in to allow manifest reality to remain in existence, a cosmic inhale. Back and forth, exhale and inhale, running and returning. First comes the Divine exhale, as it were, a “movement” within the One, which creates a wind within the mouth, which gives rise to Divine speech, which is a spiritual vibration, which gives rise to a physical vibration which in turn is energy and thus matter. This in and out movement is continuous. Every moment there is a new exhale of *Hashem* into the world and the world is created anew at every moment. On Rosh Hashanah there is the embodiment of all renewal of the entire year, this is the great Exhale of the Year. Every year before the blowing of the Shofar there is a great cosmic inhale and retention of breath, the Light of the year that has just passed returns to its Source above, and only later, at the blowing of the shofar, the literal filling of the hollowed Shofar with breath, is there an exhale, the filling of the cosmic void with life and renewed divine energy. This continuous movement of Divine energy flow in and out, exhale and inhale, is rooted in the name of *Hashem*, and when we blow the Shofar we are being the agents to bringing down Infinite light into this world, we are filling—with our breath—the empty space of creation with a new Divine light and blessing. We become co-creators, blowing out a new year, with new life through the blowing of the Shofar. The act of blowing the Shofar is an act of giving life. We take an inanimate hollowed out horn and blow life into it, giving life to lifelessness. Life is a composite of the four elements, fire, wind, water and earth, or alternatively, hot, moist, cold and dry. When a person blows they are employing the elements of wind, water/moist and fire/heat, the Shofar itself is the inanimate, dry and earthlike. Through bringing all these elements together we are creating new life. A new year and new life force is blown into reality. (Rabbi Pinson).



II. Tu B'Shvat

Tu B'Shvat ("Tu" meaning fifteenth in Hebrew, and "Shvat" being the name of the Hebrew month) is the new year for the trees. This holiday is also known as *Rosh Hashanah La-ilanot*. In North America, we are in the heart of winter during this holiday, with trees looking quite bare and frozen. But in Israel, this holiday marks the beginning of springtime and everything is green!

Planting a Tree for a Baby

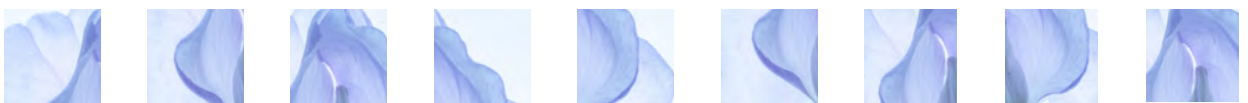
In ancient Israel, it was a custom for parents to plant a tree in honor of their new baby. This tree was traditionally planted on the first Tu B'Shvat following the child's birthdate. For baby boys, the tree would be a cedar (connecting to Psalm 92:12: "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon"). For baby girls, a cypress was planted (from the Talmud, *Gittin* 57a). Why plant a tree? Judaism understands children to be like trees, planted by God and their parents and growing slowly each year. As the custom aged over the generations, the tree planted at the child's birth would be used to create their wedding canopy (*chuppah*). As the wood from the two trees came together, so too were the bride and groom in their marriage.

Baby's First Haircut

How else does Judaism compare a child as a tree? In Ashkenazi Orthodox Jewish communities, a boy's hair is not cut until their third birthday. This ceremony (that takes the form of a big celebratory party with lots of yummy food and photos to remember the big moment) is called an *Upsherin* or a *chalachah*. At this point, the boy may begin to wear a *kippah*, *tzitzit*, and begin to study Torah for the very first time (honey is drizzled on some Hebrew letters... how sweet!). Why wait to cut their hair until now? Some say this ritual is rooted in the fear that Lilith (see Chapter 7, part II) may recognize the boy (the traditionally "more sought after" gender) and snatch him, so keeping a boy's hair long disguises him as a girl until he has safely graduated from "toddlerhood." But the more popular belief as to the reason for the long hair is because of trees. Leviticus 19:23 teaches that if you plant a tree, all fruits which grow during the first three years are "*orlah*," meaning off-limits. Just as *orlah* fruit is off-limits for three years, so too we leave a child's hair alone during the first three years. This is to ensure the child (and tree!) has enough time to plant strong, firm roots and explore their identity before any outside force attempts to change it. How beautiful!

Early Pregnancy & The Unseen

Rashi, an 11th century French commentator and arguably one of the most influential interpreters of the Talmud to date, teaches that Tu B'Shvat is when the sap of new life begins to rise inside a tree, eventually leading to the production of fruit. Even though we cannot see it yet, new life is taking shape inside the tree. This is not unlike the first trimester of pregnancy, where others may not necessarily be able to notice a pregnant belly, but the pregnant person intimately knows the excitement (and work!) of this new beginning taking form. Just like we cannot know exactly what the fruit will look like in a certain year of a tree's life (will it be healthy? Mushy? Sour? Tiny? Oversized?), a mother cannot know the complexion and appearance of her child while in the womb. But she loves deeply regardless. How often in life do we feel this deep sense of attachment to something unseen? Do you feel this way about your relationship with God as well? Loved ones who have departed this world? Tu B'Shvat reminds us of the power of our love and faith and makes room for us to explore our relationship to the unseen parts of ourselves, as well as the hidden parts of others.



III. Passover

A Personal Exodus

(Adapted from *The Passover Story Is a Meaningful Metaphor For Childbirth* by Jenna Englander)

The exodus is the story of the Jewish people leaving slavery in Egypt— *Mitzrayim* in Hebrew, which is sometimes translated as “the narrow place.” They leave by way of the Red Sea, which splits to allow the new Jewish nation to emerge safely into the freedom of the world. This all screams of birth imagery: the confinement of the womb, the splitting of the waters, the journey through a narrow path to finally emerge, reborn, as free people.

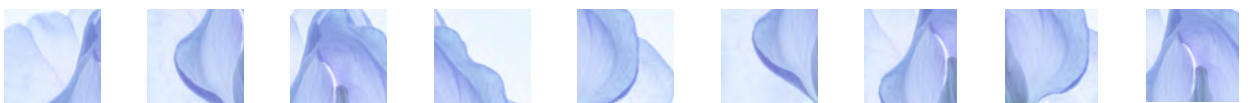
Then comes the wandering in the desert, which also serves as a metaphor for the postpartum period: disorientation, the desire to return to the womb. The Jewish people infamously complain as they wander, repeatedly bemoaning the life they left behind and asking Moses why he had made them leave (Exodus 14:11-12 and 16:3) — just like a newborn’s “fourth trimester” when, as parents, we try to mimic the environment of the womb as much as possible.

Fascinatingly, some Torah interpreters say that breast milk is related to the birth of *Am Yisrael*, the Jewish people. During the years of wandering the desert, God provides *manna* as needed — a white, fatty substance that takes on different tastes and forms depending on the people’s wants and needs. In the Torah, the Jewish people complain of five foods they miss from Egypt: onions, leeks, garlic, cucumbers, and melon.

The *midrash* (*Exodus Rabbah* 5:9) tells us that the *manna*, which otherwise can taste like anything the people want, does not taste like these five foods because they are the very foods that a nursing mother was instructed not to eat for fear that they were bad for the baby.

So if *manna* is breast milk, and the Jewish people are a newborn baby, that, of course, makes God a nursing mother. There is incredible power in this image of a breasted, maternal God so centrally placed in our Jewish story. After all, one of God’s names is Shaddai, translated as “the breasted one.” But that’s not all: If the role of the nursing mother is played by God, what does this tell us about the weight, the expectations, and the responsibilities that are required of a human nursing mother? We see throughout the story how God struggles to keep the Jewish people alive, to get them to stop crying long enough to eat what they need to survive. Anyone who has parented a newborn baby can relate to the fear and anxiety that accompanies that responsibility. It is a superhuman feat.

Of course, new mothers are not God. We are humans — tired, overwhelmed, overrun by hormones and feelings of inadequacy. And so, I am also struck by the role of the Jewish people’s *other* parent during this “postpartum” period: Moses, our guide and teacher.



Immediately following the people's complaint about the *manna* not tasting how they want, the Jewish people surround Moses, all crying at the openings of their tents. And we see Moses fall into a somewhat rare role. Instead of being the advocate for the Jewish people, we instead see him turn to God and say: "Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me? Am I the one who conceived this people, who bore them, that you should say to me nurse them?"

Moses is asking the question so many parents find themselves asking in the foggy hours of those early weeks: What have I done wrong to make this so hard? Moses then continues: "I cannot carry all this people by myself, it is too much for me. If You would deal thus with me, kill me instead, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!"

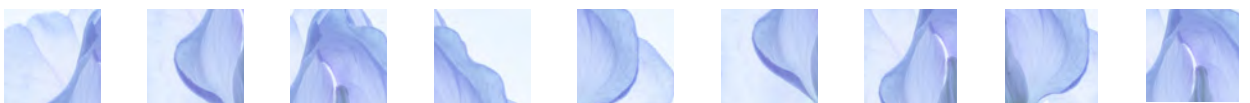
What is this if not a piercing and all-too real image of the baby blues or postpartum anxiety? Of the overwhelming pain of a crying, colicky baby in the middle of the night, whom you can't seem to comfort, who won't latch or eat and you don't know why? I felt these same feelings in my own living room, crying as my baby screamed, begging her and begging God to please just show me what I was supposed to do.

Slavery & Redemption

The slavery of Israel in Egypt is compared to a dark womb-like state where the nation of Israel is in a period of gestation. The end of pregnancy, with its accompanying intense birth pangs in preparation for birth, is compared to the ten plagues. Every birth is preceded by the breaking of the embryonic waters of the womb, which in our paradigm is reflected in the waters of the Red Sea breaking/splitting open in preparation for Israel to pass through, much like a baby exits the womb through the birth canal. Reaching the other side of the Red Sea represents the baby traversing the birth canal safely, while emerging unscathed on the other side represents the actual birth of the nation, followed by the Song of the Sea, which is analogous to a baby's first cry of life. The revelation of God's Presence during this miraculous salvation was so tangible the children actually pointed and exclaimed: "This is my God and I will praise Him" (Exodus 15:2).

In this model, the forty years in the desert represent the forty weeks of pregnancy, whereas coming into Israel, the promised land, represents the actual birth. Just as in the previous paradigms, crossing the Red Sea symbolizes the passage through the birth canal and actual birth, so too, when the Jewish people came into the Land of Israel, they did so by crossing another body of water — the Jordan River, which according to tradition also split so they could crossover. Just as the crossing of the Red Sea was accompanied by many miracles, the Talmud also describes in great detail the many miracles that occurred when Israel crossed the Jordan (*Sotah* 33b- 36a).

The story of Israel, its descent into Egypt, the subsequent slavery and redemption, and the ensuing forty years of wandering in the desert, make up the vast majority of the five books of the Torah. Although the word Torah is usually translated as "instruction," the very same root (*hara*) means "to be pregnant." The Torah is not just figuratively, but quite literally, "pregnant with meaning," revealing ever new insights, perspectives and secrets. The more one connects to learning Torah and living according to its precepts, the more we connect to the energy of constant birth and renewal, becoming veritable midwives of a new, righteous and rectified reality.



Fetuses Singing in the Womb

The Gemara asks: And Rabbi Akiva, what does he do with that verse cited by Rabbi Yosei HaGelili? The Gemara answers: He needs it to derive that which was taught in a baraita: Rabbi Meir says: From where is it derived that even fetuses in their mother's womb recited the song at the Red Sea? As it is stated in the chapter of Psalms that describes the exodus from Egypt: "In assemblies, bless God, the Lord, from the source of Israel," and fetuses are included in these assemblies. The Gemara asks: And from where does the other Sage, Rabbi Yosei HaGelili, derive the matter of the singing of the fetuses? The Gemara answers: He derives it from "from the source of Israel," which he interprets as an allusion to the womb.

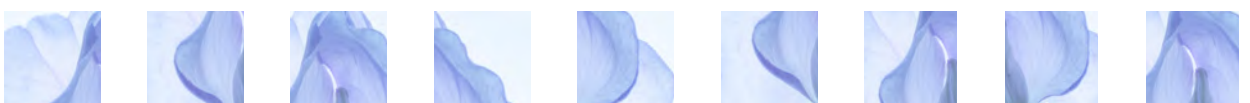
Berakhot 50a

The Jewish people left Egypt like a child leaving the womb. It was a time the Jewish people were being born. The experience at the sea was not one that the Jewish people had earned. They had not spent the time working on themselves, and were not at the level of prophets. In fact, had they remained in Egypt one more moment, they would have sunk to depths from which they could not have been revived. This was the desperate need for urgency on the part of Hashem.

It was just like the time that an infant spends in the womb of his mother. The Jewish people were brought to great levels of understanding, which they did not earn or deserve. We will always look back to the exodus to know what it means to be a Jew, and we will mention it every day, and in so many of our blessings and prayers. The song that we sang at the sea was the song of the fetus. It is the song of pure potential. Nothing has been earned, and nothing is separating us from who we really are. That purity, what we are made up of, is something that must always be on our minds. We are not learning Torah and fulfilling its commands in order to change who we are, but rather to discover that information. It is fundamental that we remember that our job in this world is simply to peel off the garbage that is separating us from ourselves. You are a Torah. As your body was being formed of the physical cells, your soul was being formed as a piece of truth and nothing more. If you become lost, it is a Torah that becomes lost. And if you can peel through the layers that are hampering you, you will discover that you really knew all that Torah all along.

IV. Sukkot

Known as the harvest festival, Sukkot takes place exactly five days after Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. "Sukkot" is named after the huts the Israelites dwelled in during their 40 years of wandering in the desert. Sukkot is one of the three main pilgrimage holidays in Judaism... in other words, this holiday is a pretty big deal! This holiday is one of gratitude, thanking God for the harvest. Some interpret this holiday also as an appreciation for all they have in life and use the week of Sukkot to put themselves in the shoes of someone less fortunate (like a person who is unhoused). Traditionally, we eat and sleep outside under our Sukkah for the entire week, and the Sukkah should be very simple in structure and appearance. In some ways, this simulates the experience of an unhoused person, braving the outdoor conditions and not having many (or any) possessions. By putting ourselves in others' shoes, we can continue to practice empathy and compassion and hopefully be motivated to share our wealth with those less fortunate.



The Sukkah as a Womb

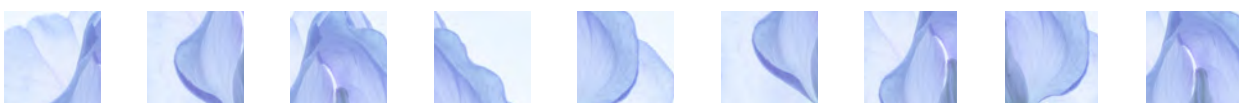
We also remove ourselves from our houses for a week to live in the Sukkah for another reason. We are transported from our regular day-to-day routines and lifestyles back to a place of holiness, where “God’s clouds of heaven and glory hang above” us. What other closed-in, cozy, bare and simple space contains such holiness? Sukkot is, in part, about exercising our compassion for others and our ability to give to others. With this in mind, the word for compassion in Hebrew is “*rachamim*.” The word for womb in Hebrew is “*rachem*.” They share the same root! The womb is the only organ in a body (of any gender) designed specifically for someone else. To grow and carry a child in a womb is a radical act of selfless compassion and *rachamim*. It is an act of giving yourself, and your body, fully to the well-being and growth of another person. When we dwell in our Sukkot, it is believed that we are experiencing the inside of God’s womb: we are protected, secure, and drawn into holiness. When Sukkot ends, we may emerge from this womb, with a renewed sense of self, responsibility, and connection to the world around us.

The Eroticism of the Lulav and the Etrog

Is that a lulav in your pocket or...? If you have seen a lulav before, you may have noticed that it appears phallic in nature. There are many, many, many interpretations of why we shake this funny looking collection of plants beneath our Sukkot. Some say the four species represent the name of God, others say the four species represent the 4 “corners of the world” and the dream to bring Jews from everywhere back together. A popular belief is that the 4 species represent different parts of the human body, with etrog as the heart, palm as the backbone, myrtle as the eyes, and willow as the lips. Which brings us to the erotic element of this holy week. The lulav resembles a male’s genitalia, while the etrog resembles a woman’s breast. This is, in part, why it is so important to make sure the lulav and etrog are completely intact (and some rabbis in Israel today pay some serious dough to find a “flawless” etrog), as they are conduits of Divine spirit and potential. On this harvest holiday, these symbols of fertility are paramount. It is traditional to recite blessings for growth and fertility beneath the Sukkah. Procreation keeps humanity, and therefore Judaism, alive. Would shaking a lulav and etrog beneath a Sukkah be a turn on for you? Give it a shake and find out!

Don't Forget to Look Up at the Stars: Embracing Our Vulnerability

When we build these fragile, hut-like structures in our backyards and neighborhoods for the holiday of Sukkot, we are reminded of our own vulnerability in the world. The Sukkah is meant to be a temporary structure (and for those of who like to plan ahead, it should also be one that is relatively easy to disassemble!). Beneath it, we are meant to experience the world - rain or shine - sheltered only by the *schach*, the green leafy material (or sometimes bamboo slats) used as the roof. But actually, the *schach* is only supposed to partially cover the roof in order for you to still be able to see the stars from inside the Sukkah at nightfall. Why? Perhaps we are to be reminded that even when we feel most vulnerable, there is something greater above us that is protecting us and aware of the bigger picture. When we experience pregnancy, we are in an incredibly vulnerable physical and mental state. Our pregnant bellies are literally on show for the whole world, despite how many oversized sweatshirts we might cover up with. And for those of us who are not accustomed to regular medical visits, we may feel vulnerable or even out of control at times, overwhelmed by the many tools and gadgets meant to monitor and support our changing bodies. But what happens when we embrace this new vulnerability and turn to spirituality to provide us comfort and grounding? Sukkot teaches us that vulnerability has the potential to open our souls in significant, spiritually-connecting ways.



V. Shabbat

The holiday that just keeps on giving! Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, takes place every Friday night at sundown until just after sundown on Saturday (a total of 25 hours). Ahad Ha'am, an Israeli poet and philosopher, famously declared, "more than the Jewish people have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jewish people." Shabbat is often compared to a marriage between God and the Jewish people, with each Friday night feeling very much like the lead up to sealing the deal beneath the chuppah at a wedding. It is a time for celebration, delicious food, quality time with family, and for many, a temporary oasis from using any technology (hello unplugged relaxation!).

Desecrating Shabbat for Birth

As we discussed earlier, a woman in labor (and postpartum) is halachically considered to be a dangerously ill person because her body is undergoing a seriously intense and life-threatening event. Therefore, it is a *mitzvah* to desecrate Shabbat on her behalf. SAY WHAT?! Hold the presses! This is a really, really, really big deal for the rabbis to declare. Desecrating Shabbat is one of the worst things a Jewish person can possibly do (at least in the eyes of more religiously observant Jews). To excuse *anyone* from observing the laws of Shabbat means something incredibly significant. But Judaism believes that the health and well-being of the mother and baby matter more than Shabbat. This is also true regarding breaking laws of *Kashrut*, or keeping kosher: if a pregnant woman is craving a non-Kosher food, she is permitted to consume it... and even enjoy it. The sages believed that a woman's urges and cravings during pregnancy are telling signs of the nutrients the growing fetus needs (which is actually still true today). That's right. So if you see a pregnant Jewish woman stuffing her face with a piece of meat that wasn't hechshered, you'll know why. High five, Judaism!

Being Present

The ability to "get away from it all" and be present is not just something you reward yourself with on an exotic vacation or visit to the spa. Shabbat offers this to us every single week, if we choose to accept it. When we put away technology like our phones and computers and when we decide to prioritize the relationships in our lives that matter most, a miraculous thing happens: we experience inner peace. Shabbat also teaches us that sometimes, things can wait. That email you've been trying to send out for a few hours? The dry cleaning that's been waiting to be picked up for days? That appointment you've been meaning to schedule? All of that is noise. Some of it is important noise. Most of it, at the end of the day, is not. Similarly, pregnancy also presents this challenge sometimes. Exhaustion is a close friend of a pregnant woman's body and mind. When you only have so much energy, you must become increasingly aware of what you must do with the limited energy you have, and what might be able to wait and get done later. This important skill will only become more prevalent in motherhood, balancing the many hats you wear as a person in this world, along with catering to the needs of your child or children. Like Shabbat reminds us, the greatest gift you could give to others, and the most nourishing practice for your own soul, is to be present. Be present with your child as you play with them. Be present in the relationships you hold dear. All the rest- the dishes, the laundry, the work emails- can *and should* wait.



Braiding Challah & Conception

Kneading and braiding Challah dough has been a long time ritual of Jewish women, dating back to the biblical age, but not taking the actual form of a braid until the 1400's. Why is this practice so linked to feminine energy and power? Because Challah is eaten on Shabbat, and women were traditionally the cooks of their households, braiding Challah fell into the hands of women (literally!). But beyond this, the practice of braiding became an activity of mindfulness and prayer. Each of the three strands that would form the braid represent something the woman might be hoping for in the coming week (for example: success for her husband, health for her aging parents, kindness for her children, etc.). In fact, so much heart and soul was expected to be poured into the braiding of a challah, that if the challah did not come out looking or tasting quite right, the woman often blamed herself for not praying hard enough or being present enough while braiding. The power of women braiding is so strong that when there is a sick person (or sometimes even a postpartum mother) within a Jewish community, forty women come together to braid (while praying) in their honor. Additionally, in a pregnant woman's ninth month, it is believed her prayers while braiding Challah are even more powerful, as she is closer to God than others at that time. One problematic piece of this beautiful challah braiding tradition was that if a woman finds herself struggling with infertility, it was believed that the reason for this was due to her lack of braiding Challah each week for Shabbat. While we now know that this understanding of how fertility works is horribly inaccurate and damaging, perhaps we can appreciate the sentiment behind this outdated belief: that a woman's mind is connected to her body in a holy, powerful, Divinely connected fashion... and that is certainly something to celebrate.



VI. Rosh Chodesh

Rosh Chodesh is translated to “head of the month.” It is a minor monthly holiday that marks the beginning of a new cycle of time (the start of each Hebrew month) of the Jewish calendar. This holiday is just about as ancient as it gets, with its establishment in Exodus 12:1-2 when God tells Moses and Aaron on what day a month should begin. The Sandhedrin (an ancient court) would declare a new month had begun after two witnesses had reported seeing the new moon in the sky. In modern times, Rosh Chodesh usually begins the Saturday before the new month and the prayer welcoming the new month, *Birkat HaChodesh*, is recited at the end of a Torah chanting.

The Rhythm of a Woman's Body

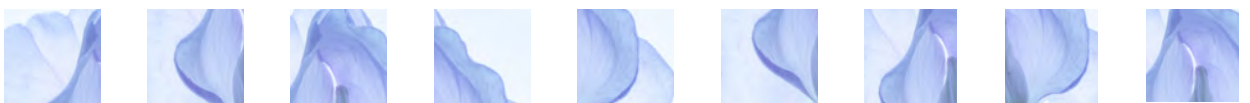
Rosh Chodesh has been attributed with women for about as long as the story of the Jewish people. Some say this is because Israelite women never offered their jewelry to the creation of the Golden Calf when the men were, and so God rewarded them with Rosh Chodesh (which is viewed as a Sabbath-like day of rest for women). But the more popular belief as to why Rosh Chodesh is considered a women's observance is because it mirrors a woman's menstrual cycle. As the moon changes form over the course of a month, so does the lining (and hormones) of a woman's womb, shedding itself or “waning” at some points and occasionally becoming pregnant or “full” at others. A woman's body keeps rhythm completely on its own and sometimes even becomes in tune with others or with environmental changes around her. Have you ever spent a retreat or an extended period of time with other women? It is no secret that in environments like that, women's menstrual cycles often align with each other. Women are keepers of relationships and time, regularly experiencing natural cycles of rebirth and renewal as a holy, entwined community.

Biblical Birth Imagery

“Before she labored, she was delivered; Before her pangs came, she bore a son.
Who ever heard the like? Who ever witnessed such events? Can a land pass through travail in a single day? Or is a nation born all at once?
Yet Zion travailed. And at once bore her children!
Shall I who bring on labor not bring about birth? —says the LORD.
Shall I who cause birth shut the womb? —said your God.
Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, All you who love her! Join in her jubilation, all you who mourned over her—
That you may suck from her breast consolation to the full, that you may draw from her bosom. Glory to your delight.
For thus said the LORD: I will extend to her prosperity like a stream, the wealth of nations, like a wadi in flood; And you shall drink of it. You shall be carried on shoulders. And delighted upon knees. As a mother comforts her son, so I will comfort you; You shall find comfort in Jerusalem.”

Isaiah 66:7-13

The haftorah for Rosh Chodesh is this excerpt above from Isaiah, comparing Zion to a pregnant woman and God to a midwife, delivering the child of Zion. It is no coincidence that this birth imagery finds its home in Rosh Chodesh observance, with its themes of rebirth, delivery, and renewed hope.

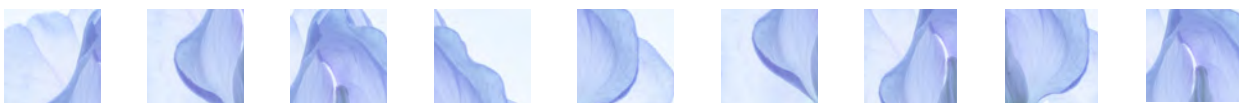


VII. Reflection Opportunity

How might you observe these holidays while experiencing pregnancy or the postpartum period? Are there any rituals or traditions you might like to experiment with?

Holidays are spaces that separate the holy and special from the mundane. When we are bored or feeling disconnected or “blah,” we can’t always just have a holiday. When you need something special and holy, what are some ways you can make yourself feel as if it is a holiday? How about during a mundane, sleepy, boring ole day of postpartum day 52 for example?

How might your family, friends, and community participate in some of these holiday rituals or practices alongside you? Would you like to make any of these a recurring tradition for your family?



Chapter 10

Conclusion: Reconnecting the Chain



*"I thank God for having brought
me from darkness to light"*

from *Shacharit*, the Morning Prayers

I. An Ongoing Invitation

I am so happy that you have had the opportunity to learn, reflect, and grow along with this Jewish pregnancy, birth, and postpartum workbook. My hope is that you are not only feeling a sense of improved Jewish literacy among these subjects, but also that you feel a sense of community and support. However, this workbook is merely the beginning of your journey. My prayer for you is that you continue to explore this rich and beautiful world of Jewish custom, ritual, tradition, and language not just throughout your future pregnancies, but throughout your entire lives. May you find what is most meaningful and then bring it near to you. May the conclusion of this workbook be an ongoing invitation to you to continue studying, reinventing, and reapplying the wisdom of our ancient ancestors into your everyday lives.

II. Finding Your Jewish Community

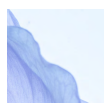
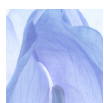
How might you be able to continue your journey of study and connection to Jewish life and learning? The best way to connect is through community. Jewish community comes in so many different forms and opportunities. Synagogues are beautiful connecting points, with an array of options for your growing family. PJ Library and other localized Jewish parenting groups may be another powerful mode of Jewish connection for you and your little ones. Check your local Jewish Community Center (“JCC”) or look up “independent minyans” in your neighborhood to see if they are offering services or programming for families. Jewish book clubs? Jewish workout groups for moms with little ones? Jewish storytime hour at your local library? And never underestimate social media! Sometimes a simple search of “Jewish parents in Kishinev, NY” produces an entire world of relationships, playdates, and Jewish events and bonding. Have you considered online communities like Ritual Well or The School of Living Jewishly (find links in the Additional Online Resources section below)? No matter how difficult it may seem to find your community, don’t give up. And if you need help connecting or finding the right space for you, simply ask (do not fear your local, friendly rabbi!).

III. Slowing Down

This workbook has provided many ideas, rituals, prayers, and opportunities to meaningfully mark this transformational moment in your life. By no means “should” you try to embrace all of them. You do not get “extra points” for reaching for them all. Instead, review what you have taken away from this workbook and then take a restorative, deep breath. Which pieces felt most meaningful to you? Which traditions would you like to truly commit to practicing? Which elements do not suit you at this time in your life? Taking the time to make intentional choices about how you and/or your family will incorporate these Jewish practices will only strengthen your relationship with Judaism.

IV. Link to TzimTzum Doula for More Information

Looking for more information about ancient Jewish wisdom regarding birth, pregnancy, and postpartum? Seeking a Jewish doula in the Greater Chicagoland area? Look no further than TzimTzum Doula (<https://www.tzimtzumdoula.com/>) and contact me for details!



Glossary

Talmud: Composed between 300-500 c.e., the Talmud is a central text of Rabbinic Judaism, which is a collection of Jewish legal discussions and debates that took place over several centuries. It consists of the Mishnah, which is the written version of the oral tradition of the Jewish law, and the Gemara, which is a commentary and analysis on the Mishnah. The Talmud is considered to be the basis of Jewish legal tradition and is studied by scholars and students of Jewish law to this day.

Tanakh: The Tanakh is the Hebrew Bible, which is the foundation of Jewish religious texts. It is an acronym that stands for the three parts of the Hebrew Bible: the Torah (the five books of Moses), the Nevi'im (the Prophets), and the Ketuvim (the Writings). The Tanakh is considered to be the sacred scripture of the Jewish people.

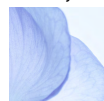
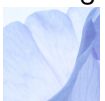
Midrash: Composed in the 13th century, Midrash is a term used to describe the collection of Jewish explanatory texts that interpret and expound upon the Torah. Midrashic literature generally takes the form of commentaries, homilies, or teachings that seek to explain the meaning of scriptural passages. Midrashic literature is usually attributed to the rabbis of the Mishnaic and Talmudic era and is considered to be a part of Jewish oral tradition.

Gemara: Composed between 200-500 c.e., the Gemara is the component of the Talmud that includes the Rabbinic commentary and analysis on the Mishnah. It is a record of the discussions and debates among the rabbis in the academies of ancient Judea and is written primarily in Aramaic. The Gemara elaborates and explains the Mishnah, and often includes the opinions and teachings of the rabbis, as well as stories, parables, and other types of material. It is the Gemara that makes up the bulk of the Talmud and is considered to be the heart of Rabbinic literature and Jewish legal tradition.

The Zohar: The Zohar is considered one of the most important works of Jewish mysticism, also known as Kabbalah, written in medieval Spain in the 13th century. It is attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a 2nd-century Tannaitic sage and mystic, but the historical authenticity of this claim is debated. The Zohar is a mystical commentary on the Torah and teaches both the literal and mystical meanings of elements of the text.

Sephardic: Sephardic refers to the Jews who have their origins in the Iberian Peninsula, specifically in Spain and Portugal. The term "Sephardic" comes from the Hebrew word "Sepharad," which is a biblical name for the Iberian Peninsula. The Sephardic Jews have their own distinct customs, traditions, and liturgy, which are different from those of Ashkenazi Jews, who have their origins in Central and Eastern Europe. The Sephardic Jews have a rich cultural heritage that has been influenced by the various cultures and civilizations that they have come into contact with throughout history, including Arabic, Greek, and Turkish cultures, as well as the Spanish and Portuguese cultures.

Ashkenazic: Ashkenazic refers to the Jews who have their origins in Central and Eastern Europe, specifically in the region of Ashkenaz, which is the Hebrew name for Germany. Ashkenazic Jews have their own distinct customs, traditions, and liturgy, which are different from those of Sephardic Jews, who have their origins in the Iberian Peninsula. Ashkenazic Jews have a rich cultural heritage that has been influenced by the various cultures and civilizations that they have come into contact with throughout history, including Germanic, Slavic, and Yiddish cultures.



Glossary (continued)

Mizrahi: Mizrahi Jews are Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent. The term "Mizrahi" is Hebrew for "Eastern," and refers to Jewish communities that have historically lived in the Middle East and North Africa.

Tzedakah: Tzedakah (also spelled tzedaka or tzedek) is a Hebrew word that is often translated as "charity," but it has a deeper meaning. It is derived from the Hebrew word "tzedek," which means justice. In Jewish tradition, tzedakah is not seen as a voluntary act of generosity, but as a moral and religious obligation. The act of giving tzedakah is seen as a way to correct the imbalance of wealth and resources in the world, and to promote social justice. Tzedakah is not limited to giving money, it can also include acts of kindness and charity. Giving tzedakah is considered a mitzvah, a commandment from God.

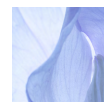
Mezuzah: A mezuzah is a small box containing a scroll with a passage from the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21) known as the Shema. The mezuzah is affixed to the doorpost of Jewish homes and is traditionally placed on the right side of the door as one enters the house. The mezuzah is a reminder of God's presence in the home and serves as a symbol of the family's commitment to Jewish faith and traditions. The act of affixing the mezuzah is a mitzvah. It's customary to touch the mezuzah and then kiss the fingers upon entering and leaving a room with a mezuzah, this is a way of showing respect to God's presence in the home.

Mitzvah/Mitzvot: A mitzvah (plural: mitzvot) is a commandment or good deed. The word mitzvah is Hebrew for "commandment" or "obligation." Mitzvot are considered to be the foundation of the Jewish way of life and are seen as a way to connect with God and to live a moral and ethical life. There are two types of mitzvot: "mitzvot bein adam le-chavero," which are commandments between human beings, such as honoring parents and not bearing false witness; and "mitzvot bein adam la-Makom," commandments between human beings and God, such as keeping the Sabbath and observing the dietary laws. There are 613 mitzvot in total, some of them are positive (to do something) and some of them are negative (to avoid something).

Shalom Bayit: Shalom bayit is a Hebrew phrase that means "peace in the home." It refers to a harmonious and peaceful relationship within a household, particularly between spouses.

Onkelos: Onkelos is the pseudonym of a first-century CE Jewish convert to Christianity who is known for his translation of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic, known as the Targum Onkelos. The translation is particularly significant for Rabbinic Judaism, which regards the translation as an authoritative interpretation of the Hebrew text. It is considered as a primary source for understanding the meaning of the Hebrew Bible.

Soranus: Soranus was a Greek physician and gynecologist who lived in the 2nd century AD. He is best known for his work "Gynecology," which was a highly influential text on women's health and medicine in ancient Greece and Rome. It covered topics such as obstetrics, gynecology, and medical treatments for various women's health conditions. Soranus' work was widely read and studied for centuries and had a significant impact on the development of gynecology as a medical field.



Glossary (continued)

Bimah: A bimah is a raised platform or pulpit in a synagogue, typically located in the center of the main sanctuary. It is used for the reading of the Torah, the recitation of prayers, and other religious ceremonies. Bimah is an Hebrew word that means "raised place" or "platform".

Tallit: A tallit (also spelled "tallis" or "talit") is a traditional Jewish prayer shawl worn during morning prayers and other religious services. It is made of a lightweight fabric, such as wool or silk, and is typically rectangular in shape with fringes (tzitzit) on the four corners. The tallit is considered a symbol of humility and submission to God, and it is also a reminder of the commandments in the Torah.

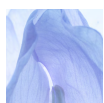
Mishpachah Taharat: Based on Leviticus 15:19 and practiced since ancient times, Mishpachah Taharat, also known as "Family Purity," is a set of Jewish laws and customs that pertain to family life, sexual conduct and menstrual purity. Mishpachah Taharat is primarily based on halakha (Jewish law) and is observed by many observant Jews, particularly those of the Orthodox and Hasidic communities. It includes laws and customs related to the separation of spouses during a woman's menstrual period, and the immersion in a ritual bath (mikveh) after the end of the period, before resuming marital relations. The laws and customs of Mishpachah Taharat are believed to promote holiness and spiritual purity within the home and family, and to strengthen the relationship between spouses. It's also seen as a way of becoming more mindful of the body, its cycles and its holiness.

Neshama: Neshama is a Hebrew word that is often translated as "soul." In Jewish theology, the neshama is considered to be the spiritual and eternal part of a person that is created by God and is unique to each individual. It is believed to be the source of a person's morality, emotions, and intellect, and is responsible for the person's connection to God and the spiritual realm. In Jewish mysticism, the neshama is often considered to be one of the three parts of the soul, along with the ruach (spirit) and the nefesh (the lower soul), each with its own purpose and function.

Shacharit: Shacharit is the morning prayer service, traditionally recited by observant Jews at the beginning of the day, typically around sunrise. The service includes the recitation of a number of psalms, hymns, and prayers, and is often followed by the reading of the Torah.

Mincha: Mincha is the afternoon prayer service, traditionally recited in the afternoon, usually around midday. This service is shorter than Shacharit and includes the recitation of a number of psalms, hymns, and prayers.

Maariv: Maariv is the evening prayer service, traditionally recited at nightfall, typically after sunset. This service is similar to the Mincha service, and include the recitation of a number of psalms, hymns, and prayers.



Glossary (continued)

Piyut: A piyut (also spelled "piyyut" or "piyutim") is a Jewish liturgical poem or hymn that is recited or sung as part of the traditional Jewish prayer service. The word "piyut" is Hebrew for "liturgical poem," and it comes from the root word "pi'el," which means "to make." Piyutim are typically written in Hebrew and are composed in a variety of poetic forms, such as acrostics, alphabetic acrostics, and rhyming couplets. They were developed during the 6th century and were used to enhance and beautify the liturgy, and to express the religious feelings and spiritual experiences of the Jewish people.

Shofar: A shofar is a musical instrument made from the horn of a ram or other kosher animal. It is traditionally blown in Jewish religious ceremonies, particularly on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The shofar's unique sound is used as a call to repentance and as a reminder of God's sovereignty.

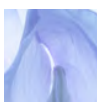
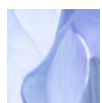
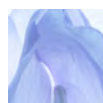
Halacha: Halakha is the collective body of Jewish religious laws, including biblical law (the 613 commandments) as well as later talmudic and rabbinic law, as well as customs and traditions. It forms the basis of religious observance and practice in traditional and Orthodox Jewish communities.

Manna: In the Torah, manna is the food that God provided for the Israelites during their journey in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt. According to the Bible, manna was a small, white, round substance that tasted like wafers made with honey. It appeared on the ground every morning, except on Shabbat, and had to be gathered before the sun melted it. Manna is seen as a symbol of God's provision and care for the Israelites in the wilderness.

Hechshered/Hechsher: A hechsher is a symbol or certification that indicates that a food product has been produced or prepared in accordance with Jewish dietary laws (kashrut). A hechsher is typically a small symbol or seal, such as a symbol of a rabbinical organization, that is placed on the food packaging. The presence of a hechsher is a way for consumers to identify foods that are suitable for consumption according to Jewish dietary laws.

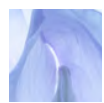
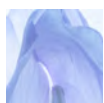
Zion: In the Bible, Zion is often used as a synonym for Jerusalem and the land of Israel. It is also associated with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which was the site of the ancient Jewish Temple. Zion refers to the idea of the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. It also refers to the spiritual center of the Jewish people and the place where God's presence is particularly felt.

Am Yisrael: Am Yisrael is a Hebrew phrase that translates to "the people of Israel." It is often used to refer to the Jewish people collectively, both in terms of their religious and cultural identity. In religious context, it is used to refer to the Jewish nation as a whole, a community bound by a shared history, culture, and religious traditions. It is also used in political context to refer to the Jewish people as a nation and their right to self-determination.



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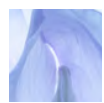
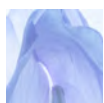
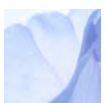
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Additional Online Resources For Jewish Pregnancy & Postpartum

New Roots - Beyond Medicalization

<https://www.jhf.org/news-blog-menu/entry/new-roots-beyond-medicalization-midwives-and-maternity-care-in-america>

Midwives For Peace

<https://www.madre.org/partners/midwives-peace>

Imeinu Israel

<https://www.facebook.com/ImeinuDoulas/>

Reform Judaism Birth Rituals

<https://www.reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/lifecycle-rituals/birth-rituals>

Giving Birth- My Jewish Learning

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/giving-birth/>

The Role of the Jewish Doula

https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/390403/jewish/Women-Helping-Women.htm

Living Jewishly

<https://livingjewishly.org/>

Birth Stories

<https://www.instagram.com/thebirthstories/>

DONA- Find a Doula

<https://www.dona.org/>

Jewish Fertility Foundation

<https://jewishfertilityfoundation.org/>

Puah Institute

<https://www.puahfertility.org/>

Yesh Tikva

<https://yeshtikva.org/>

Mayyim Hayyim

<https://www.mayyimhayyim.org/>

Postpartum Support International

<https://www.postpartum.net/>

Ritual Well

<https://ritualwell.org/>

The School of Living Jewishly

<https://www.schooloflivingjewishly.com/>

