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# *BERAHAMIM RABIM*: NEW RITUALS FOR PREGNANCY, BIRTH AND THE POSTPARTUM PERIOD

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Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Rabbinical Program

Los Angeles, California

Date: 8 March 2022

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Acknowledgements:

I write this capstone as the Reform Movement celebrates fifty years of women in the rabbinate. I am indebted to the generations of feminists, women rabbis, and liturgists who paved the way for me and the work of this capstone.

To the families I met at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center: your resilience and your hope inspired this work. Thank you for trusting me with your babies.

This project would not have been possible without the support of friends and family who spent countless hours listening to my ideas and helping me refine them.

I am grateful to my supervisor, Rabbi Dvora Weisberg, for her guidance, direction and patience.

To my Kopin family: thank you for embracing me and believing in me.

To my parents, Patti and Trevor (z"l): thank you for giving me the birth story that inspired this work, for raising me, for loving me and for your support of my dreams. And to my sister, Maia, for your friendship and wisdom.

To my partner, Rabbi Brett Kopin: thank you for believing so strongly in me and in this passion of mine. I can't wait to embody these rituals with you one day soon, *besha'ah tovah.*

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## INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by the miracle of life. My obsession comes as no surprise, for the story of my own birth has always played an important role in my family narrative. I was proudly born at home in Ecuador on a Saturday in December. Though my parents sometimes described my birth as the "scariest day of my life" (the cord was wrapped around my neck), they also held it up as one of the most beautiful and sacred moments in their lives. As a young girl, I used to play obsessively with my Baby Born doll and all the accessories that came with it - nappies, bottles, baby carriers, strollers. Six-year old me was an expert mom! My fascination with babies even extended beyond the plastic toys that filled my childhood, to real-life humans, and when a family friend had a new baby, I could not wait to hold him. While I eventually stopped playing with dolls, I continue to be deeply awed by the miracle of pregnancy, birth, and babies. Though I have never been pregnant - God willing one day I will - I regard the experience as holy and miraculous. Early in my rabbinical school training, I came to the realisation that I wanted to incorporate birth work into my rabbinate.

When the time came to complete my required unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, my supervisors approved my request to work on the maternity units. Sarah[1] was one of my first patients on the postpartum ward. The moment she recognised that I was the chaplain, she began to pour forth her soul. Sarah's baby was born at twenty-seven weeks and was facing a long journey ahead in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Grief stricken and guilt ridden, Sarah kept asking me 'why.' Why me? Why my baby? Why now? I had no answers. All I could do was sit with Sarah in her grief and help

[1] Name changed to preserve anonymity

her move forward, even as she was preparing to go home without her baby. As I tried to assess how Sarah found hope and made meaning, she looked at me tearfully and said: "I wish I had given my baby more spiritual nourishment while she was inside me." I asked Sarah what she meant by those words, and she explained that she wished she had prayed more and trusted more in God while she was pregnant.

Over the course of my summer as a Chaplain Intern at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, I journeyed with two other families as they faced the grief, uncertainty and loss that comes with parenting a baby in the NICU. I had the opportunity to pray for these tiny babies - both when they were in utero and after they had made their entrance into the world - and even to assist in a baptism for one of them. As I spent time with these families, Sarah's words continued to echo in my mind: "I wish I had given my baby more spiritual nourishment." Though Sarah was not Jewish, I couldn't help but hear her words in a Jewish context: the journey through pregnancy to parenthood is one of life's most significant life-cycle transitions, and yet there are no prescribed Jewish rituals or liturgies - tools for spiritual nourishment - for the nine months of pregnancy and for childbirth, nor for the postpartum parent. My work in the NICU confirmed for me the need for rituals and liturgies that can offer expecting parents and their unborn babies "spiritual nourishment" during the months of pregnancy and beyond. This capstone project is an attempt to account for the absence of these rituals and to fill the need through the creation of new rituals for pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period.[2]

[2] Because I have chosen to think about these three stages of parenthood as one journey, this capstone does not address issues of infertility and pregnancy loss. Though I recognise that these are common and painful experiences for many expecting parents, I have determined that these issues are beyond the scope of this capstone. For spiritual resources dealing with infertility and pregnancy loss, see Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin's 1999 book, *Tears of Sorrow, Seeds of Hope: A Jewish Companion for Infertility and Pregnancy Loss.*

## SECTION 1: UNDERSTANDING RITUAL

### What is ritual and why does it matter?

Vanessa L. Ochs defines ritual as "conventional or patterned ways of doing things that have shared and often multiple meanings."[3] Ochs argues that rituals are always the products of a time, a place, available physical materials and the appealing practices of other peoples. As Ochs suggests, rituals are never stagnant: they are made and remade, multivalent, and constantly renewed.[4] Rabbi Debra Orenstein differentiates the term 'ritual' from the related concepts of blessing, prayer, and ceremony, which often intersect with or form part of rituals. Citing psychologists Evan Imber-Black and Janine Roberts, Orenstein lists five purposes of rituals:

1. To shape, express and maintain relationships
2. To make and mark transitions
3. To heal from betrayal, trauma or loss
4. To voice beliefs and create meaning
5. To honour and celebrate individuals and life, generally.[5]

Orenstein places the greatest emphasis on the second purpose, making and marking transitions. She explains that this purpose can be divided between ritual, which makes the transitions, and ceremonies, which mark them.

Ochs also discusses the purposes of rituals, identifying nine things that rituals 'do':

1. Rituals establish new communities and sustain existing ones

[3] Vanessa L. Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 32
[4] Ibid.
[5] Rabbi Debra Orenstein, *Life Cycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages & Personal Milestones* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), 359

2. Through the act of embodiment, rituals help us to give sense and order to life
3. Rituals help us move through changes and crises in life that we would otherwise not be able to endure
4. Rituals coordinate our expectations of what we think is going to happen and how we are supposed to react
5. Rituals create boundaries and essential separations
6. Rituals bond and connect people across time and space
7. Rituals help us acknowledge and honour our experiences of the highs and lows of life, as well as all the emotions in between
8. Rituals enable us to remember and to mark time, and they connect us to natural cycles
9. Rituals confirm the presence of the sacred in the world and help us live more moral and righteous lives.[6]

Ochs argues that a Jewish ritual that fulfills any one of these nine purposes is functioning effectively, even as it may cause discomfort for some people. Referring specifically to religious rituals, Rochelle L. Millen argues that rituals "connect people not only with each other but also with a shared past and common vision of the future."[7] Looking at these two lists, I might venture to summarise the purpose of rituals as follows: rituals connect us to ourselves and to other people as they help us make and mark joyful and painful transitions, or rites of passage.

Rites of passage are culturally specific and exist in many cultures and communities around the world. Anthropologist Victor Turner, in his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and*

[6] Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, 30-31
[7] Rochelle L. Millen, *Women, Birth and Death in Jewish Law and Practice* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2004), 85

*Anti-Structure*, cites the work of Arnold van Gennep on the form and structure of rites of passage.[8] Van Gennep defines rites of passage as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age." He identifies three phases that mark rites of passage: separation, margin (or the liminal phase) and aggregation. The separation phase consists of the "symbolic behaviour that signifies the separation of an individual or group from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions, or from both."[9] During the liminal phase, a person enters an ambiguous state and passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. The third phase marks the completion and realisation of the passage, returning the ritual subject to a relatively stable state once again.[10]

Turner includes a discussion of the term liminality, a core component of ritual. Turner argues that the attributes of liminality, or of what he calls "threshold people," are necessarily ambiguous, since liminality or liminal people slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.[11] Liminal entities are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."[12] The many societies that ritualise social and cultural transitions make use of a wide variety of symbols to describe the ambiguous and indeterminate attributes of liminal entities. Liminality is often compared to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to being in the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.[13] We might consider birth,

[8] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 94
[9] Turner, *The Ritual Process,* 94
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., 95
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

then, the quintessential liminal moment, as a baby literally passes the threshold between life in utero and life in the world.

Turner emphasises how liminality serves to connect people through the shared experience of *communitas*. Liminality is a "moment in and out of time" characterised by egalitarianism and comradeship as social structures and hierarchies break down.[14] Liminal moments bind people together regardless of social status and differences. As Turner writes, "liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and [one] who is high must experience what it is like to be low."[15] Orenstein suggests that feminists have embraced ritual and liminality so strongly because they value these exact qualities. Only in leaving behind a structured, hierarchical society and entering a fluid state can real transformation take place.[16]

[14] Ibid., 96
[15] Ibid., 97
[16] Orenstein, *Lifecycles,* 360

## Ritual Innovation in Contemporary Judaism

Ochs identifies two forces that have influenced the abundance of ritual innovation in contemporary Judaism. The first is the spiritual stance shaped by democracy and open access, and the second is the dramatic change brought by Jewish feminism.[17]

### Democracy and Open Access

The ideologies of the 1960s, 70s and 80s promoted a society that upheld peace, civil rights, women's rights, ecology and consumer rights. The Jewish Catalogues, the first of which was published in 1973, documented the Jewish rituals that emerged during this period and fostered the creative spirit that led to further ritual innovations. The Jewish Catalogues took their inspiration from democracy and open access, hoping to cultivate an awareness that there were multiple ways of engaging with Jewish ritual and tradition. The books offered an array of accessible tools to those who embraced the countercultural ethos of the time. The Jewish Catalogues communicated the message that people did not have to be experts or depend on others to improve the world or to have a meaningful spiritual life.[18] Further, the Catalogues offered tools and a guide to Jewish living that inspired people to see themselves as having the agency to create new or refreshed rituals.[19]

### Jewish Feminism

Jewish feminism also had a major influence on the creation of new Jewish rituals. Over the last fifty years, women have gained access to resources and attained positions of leadership within the community that have granted them greater influence over Jewish culture and life. With this influence, they have innovated a new body of rituals, some adapted from existing

[17] Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual,* 39
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 43

rituals and others created anew.[20] Ochs identifies eight characteristics of new women's rituals:

1. Marking the unmarked, specifically unmarked events linked to women's bodily experiences
2. Cultivating community and encouraging supportive sharing and story-telling
3. Allowing for improvisation and personalisation
4. Privileging the spirituality of the individual over that of the entire Jewish people
5. Taking place in less regulated space, such as homes or in nature
6. Being self-explanatory and easy to use
7. Allowing for spontaneity
8. Promoting a Jewish women's agenda.[21]

As these characteristics shape new women's rituals, the question that today motivates Jewish feminist innovation asks how these rituals and their accompanying impact "can be brought back to the entire community to revise the Judaism that is shared by men and women alike?"[22]

[20] Ibid., 46
[21] Ibid., 48
[22] Ibid., 47

## SECTION 2: PREGNANCY IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

### Why are there no prescribed pregnancy/birth rituals?

Sylvia Rothschild suggests that we live in a Jewish world where "many life experiences are invisible to our liturgy, and where our traditional liturgy and ritual is often out of touch with the people for whom it is intended."[23] Indeed, Judaism has very few required rituals to mark pregnancy, birth and the postpartum period. Jewish life-cycle rituals begin eight days after birth with the circumcision ceremony and centre around the baby rather than the experience of the new parents. Jewish communities around the world have long used ritual, custom and prayer to mark the experiences of pregnancy and birth, yet these stages of the life-cycle have remained undefined in Jewish tradition, never integrated as part of mainstream ritual and liturgical practice.

As Rabbi Debra Orenstein notes, this ritual absence seems especially odd given the traditional Jewish emphasis on the family, procreation and Jewish continuity.[24] According to Orenstein, two main reasons account for this neglect. First, Jewish law approaches pregnancy and childbirth with great caution, given the risks that it poses for both mother and baby. For example, in many Jewish communities, women recite *gomel* (a prayer of thanksgiving for coming safely through a dangerous or life-threatening experience) after giving birth. According to the halakha, a baby under thirty days old who dies is not mourned as a "full person." Millen elaborates on Judaism's cautious attitude towards pregnancy and birth in her discussion of the biblical commandment to be fruitful and multiply.[25] As Millen highlights,

[23] Sylvia Rothschild, "Creating Liturgy," in *Taking up the Timbrel: The Challenge of Creating Ritual for Jewish Women Today,* ed. Sylvia Rothschild and Sybil Sheridan (London: SCM Press, 2000), 10
[24] Orenstein, *Lifecycles*, 1
[25] Millen, *Women, Birth and Death,* 23

the rabbis of the Talmud believed that the mitzvah of procreation applied only to men. One reason why they obligated men and not women is because they considered childbirth a life-threatening experience after which one recites *gomel.* Millen argues that the rabbis exempted women from the obligation of procreation because they could not consider requiring a woman to put herself in a situation of possible risk, though she may voluntarily choose to put herself in such a situation.[26]

Orenstein offers a second explanation for the lack of birth rituals, noting that childbirth is a woman's domain "at its most mysterious, powerful and frightening."[27] Millen refers to the woman's domain as the private realm, emphasising how it stands in tension with the public realm that men predominantly occupy.[28] She discusses how some sources characterise women by an "inner sense and intrinsic quality of privacy" that therefore primes them for domestic and child rearing roles in society. In contrast, men are better suited for more public roles, which develop, transform and transmit general culture.[29] From this perspective, the dearth of pregnancy and birth rituals in Judaism either reflects the sociological order described by these sources or results from women's relegation to the private sphere, where they did not have the authority and influence to develop and transmit the ritual culture. Millen offers - albeit with suspicion - an alternative perspective which regards the private realm as higher than the public. While Judaism grants spiritual priority to private or inner development, Millen criticises the notion that women are considered to possess an intrinsic talent for this set of qualities. She highlights the political and social consequences of

[26] Ibid.
[27] Orenstein, *Lifecycles,* 2
[28] Millen, *Women, Birth and Death,* 4
[29] Ibid.

emphasising the (assumed) private female nature: the limitation of opportunities for women in religious law and ritual, work, and access to education.[30]

Millen discusses the rabbinic view of pregnancy and childbirth. She acknowledges that, although the Talmud assumes that birth plays a central role in the life of a woman and is valued greatly by the community, it says very little about the meaning of birth.[31] One rabbinic text, Mishna Shabbat 2:6, offers a negative view of childbirth, suggesting that women die during childbirth for three reasons: negligence in observing the commandments of *niddah,* the taking of challah and the lighting of Shabbat candles. As Millen writes, in this Mishna, female biology is mixed in a punitive and threatening way with the three commandments for which women are primarily responsible. Failure to observe these commandments for which husbands and children depend upon women leads to death in childbirth. This mishna thus reflects the Talmud's view of a cause-effect relationship between sin and the presence of evil in the world.[32] Putting this text aside, Millen argues that the Talmud's general lack of explication about the meaning of birth creates opportunities for each generation to find its own meaning. [33]

In her book, *Expecting Jewish! A Millennial Mom's Practical Guide to How Judaism Can Be a Blessing to New Moms and Moms-to-be*, Marion Haberman couples her own experiences of birth with anecdotes and information that she collected from rabbis, authors and birth professionals. Her conversation with author Anita Diamant offers a different answer to the question of why the Jewish tradition does not have any established birth rituals. According to

[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., 16
[32] Millen, *Women, Birth and Death,* 17
[33] Ibid., 16

Anita Diamant, the experience of giving birth is "sacred in itself," a moment so miraculous and spiritual that it transcends ritual and prayer.[34] Tikva Frymer-Kensky contradicts Diamant in her argument that "the making of another human being should be an occasion for realising the sacred holiness of all life."[35] For Frymer-Kensky, the holy intensity of the experience of pregnancy demands enrichment through ritual and prayer.[36] Though I agree that the experience of birth is beyond words, I, like Frymer-Kensky, do not believe that it transcends prayer and ritual. Rather, its deeply spiritual and liminal nature make it all the more deserving of ritual and prayer, and, as Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin suggests, even "alters the boundaries of propriety and admits women into the central cycle of liturgy and ritual."[37] As Chana Weisberg so aptly describes, "pregnancy and birth take place in an altered spiritual reality, in which the dividing curtain between this world and the next is left slightly open."[38]

[34] Marion Haberman, *Expecting Jewish! A Millennial Mom's Practical Guide to How Judaism Can Be a Blessing to New Moms and Moms-to-be* (Teaneck: Ben Yehuda Press, 2021), 166
[35] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Motherprayer: The Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), xxvi
[36] Ibid., xxv
[37] Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, *Out of the Depths I Call to You: A Book of Prayers for the Married Jewish Woman* (Northvale and London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1995), xi
[38] Chana Weisberg, *Expecting Miracles: Finding Meaning and Spirituality in Pregnancy Through Judaism* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2004), 24

## Jewish Customs and Rituals for Pregnancy, Birth and the Postpartum Period

Pregnancy:

According to Michele Klein, celebrating pregnancy has never been part of Jewish ritual, especially amongst Ashkenazi Jewish communities, where people feared that any celebration during pregnancy would invite catastrophe.[39] Sephardic Jews, however, have often celebrated a first pregnancy with a ritual called *kortadura de fashadura* (Judeo-Spanish) or *tekti'a el-g'daouere* (Judeo-Arabic), meaning 'the cutting of the swaddling clothes.' This old Sephardic custom, still practised by some Jews in Istanbul, involves the ceremonial cutting of a cloth to make the baby's first clothes. Centred around the expecting mother, women would gather during the fifth month of her first pregnancy and set out liqueurs and chocolates, tea, cakes and sugared almonds on the best china on hand embroidered tablecloths that traditionally comes from the mother-to-be's dowry. The honour of making the first cut in the cloth goes to a relative who is herself a mother and whose own parents are still alive, as this is seen as a good omen for long life. At the moment of the cut, the pregnant woman throws white sugared almonds on the cloth to symbolise the sweet and prosperous future she wishes for her child.[40]

Sephardic Jews in other countries similarly celebrated the cutting of the baby's first clothes with slight variations. In Morocco, for example, the midwife cut the cloth into swaddling clothes. In the early twentieth century in Amadiya, Kurdistan, when a young woman was certain of her pregnancy, she went to her father's house where her mother and female relatives sewed clothes for the expected baby. An old woman who had delivered many babies

[39] Michele Klein, *A Time to be Born: Customs and Folklore of Jewish Birth* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000), 86
[40] Ibid.

received the honour of making the sheets for the cradle while the invited women sang and danced and offered advice to the pregnant woman. In the evening, they prepared a feast for the men in the husband's house. This ritual of celebrating the joy of pregnancy reflects the influence of the surrounding culture, for Jews in other parts of Kurdistan kept the pregnancy secret as long as possible.[41] In Yemen, women also concealed their pregnancies for as long as possible and each woman sewed what she would need for her own baby, and then only in the seventh month. When she was certain she was pregnant, she would share the news with her mother in a beautiful, ritualised conversation:

"Oh mother, we have sown a generation."

"Oh daughter, the tidings will come at the hour of birth."[42]

Klein highlights how these rituals have fallen out of use amongst Sephardi and Kurdistani Jews in recent years. However, at the same time, an increasing number of Western Jewish women have started innovating rituals to mark the new role of becoming a mother. These rituals take place in the home as well as in the synagogue, and include ritual objects like challah and wine, and canonised blessings and prayers, such as the *mi sheberakh* blessing. Klein argues that these ritual innovations reflect the fact that, for most Jewish women, childbearing is no longer a foregone conclusion but a particular life stage that they reach after conscious decision-making and which they seek to imbue with personal spiritual significance.[43] Lori Hope Lefkowitz suggests that "adding childbirth to Judaism means

[41] Ibid., 87
[42] Ibid., 88
[43] Ibid.

adding it for Jewish men as well as Jewish women."[44] She argues that reclaiming childbirth as a Jewish event will have a far-reaching impact on Jewish ritual and liturgy in general.

Among Ashkenazi communities, *tkhines*, supplicatory Yiddish prayers, gave voice to the experiences of women during pregnancy and birth. According to Chava Weissler, "these prayers structured women's devotional lives by defining a range of topics considered suitable for women and by establishing a realm of discourse for addressing these topics."[45] Each *tkhine* begins with a heading indicating when and how the prayer should be recited. The *tkhines* were almost always phrased in the first-person singular, and often left space for the praying woman to insert her own name, thus making them a very personal address to God. These supplications offer a rich source of data for interpreting the meanings that various religious acts held for women.[46] Weissler identifies two main groups of *tkhines*: those that originated in Western Europe in the sixteen and seventeen hundreds and those that originated in Eastern Europe in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. In her discussion, Weissler points to the complexities of the issues surrounding the authorship of the *tkhines*, since the majority of them were published without an attributed author. She suggests that *tkhines* were likely written by both men and women.[47]

Comparing the *tkhines* to a work from the Yiddish ethical literature known as *Seder mitzvas ha-noshim,* Weissler considers how they each portray the relationship between women's bodies, the biblical story of Eve, and the three women's commandments, *challah, niddah,*

[44] Lori Hope Lefkowitz, "Sacred Screaming: Childbirth in Judaism," in *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages & Personal Milestones,* ed. Debra Orenstein (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), 7
[45] Chava Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 6
[46] Ibid., 6
[47] Ibid., 9

and candles.[48] The first text, written by Rabbi Benjamin Aaron Solnik, builds on the rabbinic view that regards the women's commandments as punishment and atonement for Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden. *Tkhines,* on the other hand, do not link the women's commandments to Eve's sin. Rather, these petitionary prayers focus on the rewards for observance and the positive religious significance of the acts. Though they may consider menstruation and childbirth as a consequence of Eve's sin, most *tkhines* for childbirth petition that both mother and child may come through the birth alive and healthy.[49]

Pregnant women often made use of protective prayers, psalms and charms to safeguard their pregnancies. One folk custom still observed by many women today is to carry around a red thread that has been wrapped seven times around the matriarch Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem.[50] According to Sandy Falk and Rabbi Daniel Judson, Rachel's connection with pregnancy and divine intervention make her a natural focus for prayers to protect pregnancy.[51] Rachel, who originally pleaded with Jacob to have children, died giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. A famous midrash ascribes intercessory powers to Rachel, teaching that her tears have the power to cause God to act graciously towards Israel.[52] In another custom, intended for women who conceive after multiple miscarriages, a woman ties a Torah binder around her belly in the hope that it will protect the growing fetus and bring the pregnancy to full term.[53]

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[48] Ibid., 66
[49] Ibid., 71
[50] Sandy Falk and Rabbi Daniel Judson, *The Jewish Pregnancy Book: A Resource for the Soul, Body and Mind during Pregnancy, Birth & the First Three Months* (Nashville: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004), 16
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Klein, *A Time to be Born,* 114

Falk and Judson discuss the custom of using the *mikveh* during the ninth month of pregnancy as an act of physical and spiritual preparation for birth.[54] According to Jewish custom, pregnant women have a special ability to bless others, so pregnant women who immerse in the *mikveh* may pray for others who desire to become pregnant. Similarly, women who wish to become pregnant may immerse themselves in the *mikveh* after a pregnant woman. The ritual of immersing in the *mikveh* during the ninth month offers a kind of book-ending to the experience of birth as a woman returns to immerse after the birth of her baby.

Birth:

In Genesis 3:16, God tells Eve of the consequences of her actions in the Garden of Eden: "I will increase your pain in childbirth, in pain shall you bear children." Whether these words function as an aetiological explanation for the pain of childbirth or whether the pains of childbirth came as a punishment for Eve's actions, Jews throughout the ages have found folk remedies and rituals to ease the pain of labour. One Sephardic custom involved bringing a Torah scroll into the labouring woman's room and placing it on her belly. Though some rabbis felt that it was a desecration of the Torah to use it as an amulet in this way, they permitted the opening of the ark when a woman went into labour so that prayers and psalms for her well-being could be recited in the synagogue.[55] Yemenite Jews and Sephardim in Georgia and Turkistan covered the labouring woman's head with the *parokhet*, the curtain of the ark, to create proximity between the Torah and the labouring woman. Both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewish women attempted to hasten delivery by holding on to a string connected on the other end to the Ark, so that with each contraction she pulled on the string and opened

[54] Falk and Judson, *The Jewish Pregnancy Book,* 56
[55] Ibid., 70

the Ark in the hope of also opening her womb.[56] Many Jews believed that these acts not only asked for God's attention and intervention but also frightened away demons that might be capable of killing a woman in her fragile condition.[57]

Ashkenazi communities in eastern Europe also developed a custom for easing the pain of labour, using the etrog as the ritual object. This ritual took place on the seventh day of Sukkot, *Hoshanah Rabbah,* when pregnant women would bite the end (*pitom)* off of an etrog. The ritual was accompanied by a prayer that first appeared in a book called the *Tze'enah u-re'enah*, a 17th century book of biblical commentary written in Yiddish and specifically for women. This ritual is linked to the biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden in which we learn that, because Eve ate from the forbidden fruit, women were cursed with pain during childbirth. Though the forbidden fruit remains unspecified, the author of the *Tze'enah u-re'enah* assumed that it was an etrog tree and taught a woman to pray for an easy delivery while biting off the end of the fruit, asserting that "had Eve not eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, each woman would give birth as easily as a hen lays an egg."[58] [59] In this ritual, the pregnant woman spits out the *pitom* as a kind of protest against Eve's actions, as if to say that had she been there, she would not have eaten the fruit and the curse of labour pains would not have come into being.[60] The prayer, as quoted in *Voices of the Matriarch*s, reads as follows:

[56] Klein, *A Time to be Born, 149*
[57] Ibid.
[58] Klein, *A Time to be Born*, 143
[59] Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs,* 73
[60] Falk and Judson, *The Jewish Pregnancy Book*, 71

> *Lord of the world, because Eve ate of the apple, all of us women must suffer such great pangs as to die. Had I been there, I would not have had any enjoyment from [the fruit]. Just so, now I have not wanted to render the etrog unfit during the whole seven days when it was for a mitzvah. But now, on Hoshanah Rabbah, the mitzvah is no longer applicable, but I am [still] not in a hurry to eat it. And just as little enjoyment as I get from the stem of the etrog would I have gotten from the apple that you forbade.*[61]

Both Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews believed that the spirits of the dead have access to the divine realm and could help to alleviate pain during childbirth. In a Yiddish custom known as *kevorim reissen* (lit: to tear graves), a woman's relatives would visit the cemetery when a birth was particularly difficult. They would compose special prayers and measure the grave of a holy person with a string that they would then cut up and use as wicks for candles that they burned in the synagogue. Sephardic Jews also visited the grave of a holy person to ask for an easy delivery before the onset of labour.[62]

Though the Talmud does not discuss much about pregnancy and birth, it does mention some liturgical obligations associated with birth. When a woman gives birth to a baby boy, both parents are obligated to recite the blessing of praise called *hatov vehametiv:* Blessed are You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the Universe, Who is good and does good. The woman recites the blessing at the time of completion of delivery while the man, if he is not with her, recites it as soon as he hears the news. According to the sources, only the parents may recite this blessing

[61] Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs,* 73
[62] Klein, *A Time to be Born,* 146

upon the occasion of birth since they have the pleasure of deriving benefit or usefulness from a son.[63] The birth of a baby girl, on the other hand, is acknowledged with the *sheheheyanu* prayer. Although the tradition does not obligate parents to recite *sheheheyanu* at the birth of their daughters, they should nonetheless recite it because of the joyfulness that accompanies the birth of any child.[64]

Postpartum

Postpartum rituals, customs and celebrations begin with the delivery of the placenta. According to the Talmud, the placenta should be preserved in a bowl with oil, straw or sand depending on the wealth of its bearer, and then buried in the earth as a pledge for the body of the baby that will one day also be buried in the earth.[65] If mother and baby are both well, the first week after birth is filled with celebration as family and friends visit the new parents. These first-week rituals developed around the birth of baby boys, although Jews have also celebrated the first week in the life of a daughter.[66] One celebration for the birth of a boy, known as *shalom zakhar*, takes place on the first Friday night when friends and family fill the home or synagogue and join the family in prayer and for a festive meal. The name of this celebration derives from a Talmudic dictum in Niddah 31b: "כיון שבא זכר בעולם בא שלום בעולם - when a male comes into the world, peace comes into the world." An Asian and North African celebration, *Shabbat Avi ha'ben*, centres around the father as the community joins him in prayer and singing over the first Shabbat after birth. After the prayers, songs, and poems at the synagogue, the well-wishers join him at home for a festive meal. If he is

[63] Millen, *Women, Birth and Death*, 71
[64] Ibid., 73
[65] B Talmud Shabbat 129b; J Talmud Shabbat 18:3
[66] Klein, *A Time to be Born,* 205

wealthy, he gives money to charity on this occasion; if not, others give money to provide for the circumcision expenses.[67]

Klein describes an Ashkenazi Jewish custom practised by Jews in the Rhine Valley from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. The custom derived from the need for candlelight before and during the circumcision ceremony. Three days before the circumcision ceremony, the women in the community gathered around the new mother to make the candles, known as a *Yidschkerz* or *Yidishkerts*, for the circumcision ceremony. First, they made a large wax candle that was to remain lit until the third day after the *brit milah*; then they prepared twelve braided candles symbolising the twelve tribes of Israel as they shared legends about Jacob and his sons and offered wishes for the new baby.[68] Rabbi Goldie Milgram discusses another Ashkenazi custom practiced from medieval times until the Holocaust known as *vaht naht* or *Veula*, meaning "watch night."[69] In this all-night vigil occurring on the last night of the baby's birth week, family and friends would visit, celebrate and stay up beside mother and baby as incense burned and the community composed new midrashim in the child's honour.

Klein argues that the circumcision is the most important of all the religious ceremonies after birth.[70] Indeed, circumcision serves as both a marker and celebration of Jewish identity, and even the most secular Jews continue to observe this commandment even today. I have chosen not to include a discussion of this ritual since it has been preserved in our tradition. However, I would like to consider the different ways in which Jewish communities have

[67] Ibid., 206
[68] Ibid., 207
[69] Rabbi Goldie Milgram, *Living Jewish Life Cycle: How to Create Meaningful Jewish Rites of Passage at Every Stage of Life* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009), 119
[70] Klein, *A Time to be Born*, 211

celebrated the birth of a daughter, as these ceremonies and customs have not been preserved as a commandment.

Both Klein and Millen discuss a Sephardic celebration known as *las fadas, hatas,* or *piadamento.* The ceremony derived from a non-Jewish custom to have a child blessed by "fairies" - *hadas* in Spanish. Among Sephardim, the ritual involved inviting the community and the rabbi to the home of the new parents. The rabbi would hold the baby, offer a blessing, and place a coin on the sheet before passing the baby around to the guests who would do the same. The rabbi would announce the baby's name and bless her and her parents, and then everybody joined for a festive meal. In the days of home birth, the collected money was given to the midwife.[71] [72] In the *zeved habat* ceremony, Jews in India, Yemen, Syria and Bukhara, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq celebrated the "gift of a [newborn] daughter" as they shared her name, recited blessings and biblical verses, and feasted.[73] Millen suggests that these celebration ceremonies for girls "indicate two ideological threads regarding the birth of a daughter" that are also reflected in rabbinic texts.[74] First, ceremonies that use the name *zeved habat* or *simhat bat* suggest an understanding that a woman is a part of the covenant, *brit*, without the external, bodily marker. Others, who include the word *brit* in naming ceremonies for girls, view the ceremony as parallel to circumcision as it represents the public induction of a daughter into the covenant. However, even as these ceremonies offer spiritual and religious significance to those who practise them, they are not halakhically equivalent to a *brit milah.*[75]

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[71] Ibid., 228
[72] Millen, *Women, Birth and Death,* 96
[73] Klein, *A Time to be Born, 230*
[74] Millen, *Women, Birth and Death,* 96
[75] Ibid.

Dina Dahbany-Miraglia describes a traditional Yemenite Jewish post-partum rejoicing known as *al-wafaa,* which celebrates a mother's successful birthing of her baby.[76] On the thirtieth day after birth, the new mother's female relatives and friends gather to celebrate the survival of both mother and baby. Each woman brings food to share and a gift for the new mother, and each sings and dances before mother and baby. The poem-songs narrate past and imaginary events and poetically describe feelings women have about conception, pregnancy and birth. A small coffin in the centre of the room adds an ominous tone to an otherwise joyful celebration and honours the narrow thread between life and death that lies at the heart of birth.

As mentioned above, it is customary for a woman to visit the *mikveh* after giving birth, as the Torah considers childbirth a cause of ritual impurity. The period of impurity lasts for seven days after the birth of a boy, and fourteen days after the birth of a girl. However, a woman only performs the postpartum immersion after forty days if she gave birth to a boy and eighty days if she gave birth to a girl.[77] Klein discusses how different Jewish communities marked this period of forty or eighty days by keeping a new mother and her baby separate from the community. In Ethiopia, for example, a woman remained segregated from the community in a 'hut of childbed' while her female neighbours and relatives performed her housework and brought her food. At the end of this period of separation, she washed thoroughly, shaved her head, put on clean clothes, and reunited with her family at dusk for a celebratory feast. Among the Bene Israel community of India, women gave birth in their fathers' homes and

[76] Dina Dahbany-Miraglia, "*al-wafaa:* A post-Partum Celebration," in *A Ceremonies Sampler: New Rites, Celebrations, and Observances of Jewish Women*, ed. Elizabeth Resnick Levine (San Diego: Women's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education, 1991), 9
[77] Klein, *A Time to be Born,* 232

remained there for the entire period of purification. After forty or eighty days, they washed themselves and the baby in preparation for their homecoming. The family prepared a special poultry dish laid out on a white sheet, a symbolic sacrificial offering, and then ate from this dish before sending a message to the husband that his wife and child were ready to return home. Dressed in new clothes, mother and baby went home with gifts of jewellery to join a homecoming feast with friends and relatives. In Yemen, after the period of purification, mother, baby, and friends went ululating out of the village with bundles of rue. After a distance, they turned around, symbolically threw away the bundles as they shouted "come back in three years," and made their way back into the town.[78]

This period of postpartum separation is not unique to Jewish communities. Heng Ou, Amely Greeven and Marisa Belger identify many different cultures and communities that venerate postpartum separation. For these authors, this time after the birth of a baby has less to do with issues of impurity and more to do with protecting maternal health. The postpartum period of separation suggests that

> "the story of childbearing doesn't finish the moment the baby is delivered and taken into her mother's arms. It continues. [...] This several-weeks span is a nonnegotiable time of healing and recovery; it is a woman's birthright, and it is essential for sustaining herself, her family, and society at large."[79]

[78] Ibid., 234
[79] Heng Ou, Amely Greeven, and Marisa Belger, *The First Forty Days: The Essential Art of Nourishing the New Mother* (New York: Abrams, 2016), 30.

Perhaps then, these Jewish post-partum customs and rituals developed not in response to the Biblical verses about ritual impurity, but because Jewish birthing women understood the physical, spiritual and social benefits of lying in.

A final postpartum ritual centres around weaning. Genesis 21:8 teaches us that Abraham held a feast when his son, Isaac, was weaned, while in 1 Samuel, Hannah offers a prayer of thanksgiving when she weans her son, Samuel. Despite being mentioned in the Bible, weaning never became part of Jewish ritual, though some communities did mark the weaning of a child. Syrian and Iraqi Jews celebrated with a large festive party and served wheat cooked in sugar and cinnamon, as wheat symbolised fertility and the child's weaning welcomed the possibility of another pregnancy. In Eastern Europe, Jewish mothers celebrated a child's weaning by taking its first food from a neighbour. When the child accepted the food, the mother said, "may this be the last time you will be supported by others."[80] A weaning ceremony included in *A Ceremonies Sampler* frames the ceremony around the themes and rituals of havdallah.[81]

The customs and celebrations described in this section reveal how Jews across time and space have held up the experience of pregnancy and birth as fragile yet deeply sacred. They reflect the understanding that the entire community shares in the blessing of new life and they illuminate how generations of Jews have innovated, transmitted and inherited rituals to mark significant moments in their lives.

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[80] Klein, *A Time to be Born,* 236

[81] Maria Papacostaki and Harry Brod, "Weaning Ceremony," in *A Ceremonies Sampler: New Rites, Celebrations, and Observances of Jewish Women*, ed. Elizabeth Resnick Levine (San Diego: Women's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education, 1991), 39

## SECTION 3: CREATING NEW RITUAL

Rabbi Debra Orenstein, in her edited volume *Life Cycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones*, discusses the seven steps of ritual creation. The first step seeks to clarify what a ritual is, differentiate ritual from other ways of marking a passage or milestone, and clarify the purpose of ritual. Rituals ideally help to effect a transition and transformation in status. Orenstein argues that rituals need to make use of symbols and physical behaviours to make their messages concrete and to create a noticeable change - a "before-and-after picture" - that will be meaningful to both the individual and the community.[82] Liminality, a moment of transition, makes up a key component of rituals. According to Orenstein, liminal moments are ambiguous and even dangerous, as the end result has not been established even though the status quo has already been abandoned.[83] Important for this capstone project, Orenstein highlights the significance of the liminal specifically as it concerns women, for women's bodies serve as physical thresholds which we all cross when entering the world. Women are also often relegated to the thresholds of Jewish life as they act behind the scenes to support men and children through major life transitions.[84]

The second step in the process of ritual creation involves researching what resources are already available and what rituals already exist to mark transitions. Orenstein emphasises investigating less well-known aspects of the tradition, such as Sephardic, Mizrahi, and Hasidic texts and customs. Only once the research is complete can one move onto step three, creating a ritual from the ground up.[85] When there are no models upon which to base new

[82] Orenstein, *Lifecycles, 359*
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid., 360
[85] Ibid., 361

rituals, Orenstein recommends asking and answering two questions. First, what is the transformation you wish to effect? Second, if the ritual consists of three stages - before/status quo, during/liminality, after/new state - what are the main characteristics of each state? Once these questions have been answered, one can engage in a Jewish brainstorming to identify Jewish figures, texts, symbols, ritual objects, and songs that each stage calls to mind and which can be evoked or included in the ritual. Ochs identifies all of these items as texts that can be transformed, reworded, adapted or used as a framework for completely new creations.[86] Orenstein emphasises drawing on the existing tradition in creating new rituals, so that they "ring right and true not only because the words are authentic, but because the method is as well."[87] In accordance with this view, Ochs argues that grounding new rituals in the tradition creates a sense of ownership over them and makes new rituals feel genuinely Jewish. She argues that grounding innovative rituals in the past "evokes certainty, security and imagined community."[88]

The fourth step consists of distinguishing the stages of ritual Jewishly and incorporating them in deed as well as word. Orenstein identifies the before, during and after stages of ritual with the Jewish processes of creation, revelation and redemption. God created the world through separation - both of Godself from the world, and of one element from another. Thus, "separation enables creation and establishes our initial status."[89] Revelation corresponds to the "during" stage, representing the transition from one state to another. During this liminal moment in the ritual, the essential teaching of the ritual must be given. The after stage is, in

[86] Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual,* 5
[87] Orenstein, *Lifecycles,* 363
[88] Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual,* 6
[89] Orenstein, *Inventing Jewish Ritual,* 364

Jewish terms, redemption: the end of time and the world as we know it, marking the new status achieved by a ritual as a completion rather than a contradiction of one's previous state. An effective ritual distinguishes between these three states through affect: employing the senses and the body to signify that change is coming. Rothschild also highlights the active role that the body plays in rituals, emphasising that "the notion of pray-er as prayer must be fostered and nourished."[90]

The fifth step consists of taking all the learning and materials from steps one through four and putting it all together. Orenstein emphasises the importance of selection in the process of writing down the ritual, arguing that when it comes to ritual, shorter is always better and more impactful. Orenstein cautions against including explanations about ritual and liturgical choices in a ritual. Rather, each choice should be rich enough that it requires little to no introduction. Orenstein argues that in a community that gathers to witness and experience a transformation, those kinds of explanations actually detract from the ritual rather than add to it.[91] Orenstein further argues that the best innovative rituals are grounded in both the personal and the scholarly experience: "personal perspectives are the passion that drives ritual innovations; they not only deserve to be honoured, they are essential to the creative process" while "lack of grounding can make a ritual seem unweighty."[92] Orenstein cautions against undervaluing the role of community in ritual as she suggests that lifecycle rituals transform both personal and communal status and can be seen as the nexus between the two. Ritual not only necessitates community, but it also reinforces it and even creates it.[93]

[90] Rothschild, *Taking Up the Timbrel,* 12
[91] Ibid., 368
[92] Ibid., 368-369
[93] Ibid.

The final steps of the process of ritual creation involve critiquing the ritual and making revisions, and finally enacting and sharing the ritual. Orenstein acknowledges that even if the ritual does not survive beyond its first sharing, the process of creating it is transformative in and of itself. [94]

The pages below include five new rituals: one for pregnancy, two for birth, and two for the postpartum period. In creating these rituals, I have attempted to follow Rabbi Debra Orenstein's Seven Steps as far as possible. Where I have included explanations for my choices, I have done so for the purposes of this research project. I offer these rituals with humility and trepidation. What do I, not yet a mother, know about pregnancy and birth? Who am I to write these rituals? I also acknowledge the limitations of sharing these rituals on paper alone, for rituals ought to be embodied and experienced.

In drawing on the wisdom of our tradition, and the experiences of actual mothers with whom I spoke, I hope that these rituals can give voice to some of the feelings and experiences that accompany the rite of passage into parenthood. I hope that, even as I have grounded these rituals in the Jewish tradition, they will also fill a ritual void. I hope that I have done justice to the transformative experience of pregnancy and early parenthood, and I hope that these rituals will meaningfully facilitate their participants' transitions into parenthood. Mostly, I hope that these five rituals will give voice to many more that will one day become part of mainstream Jewish practice.

[94] Ibid., 371

In her book, Orenstein offers a prayer for one who creates new rituals - I include it here as I share these new rituals for the first time.[95]

אַטֶּה לְמָשָׁל אָזְנִי אֶפְתַּח בְּכִנּוֹר חִידָתִי׃

I will incline my ear to a parable; I will lay open my mystery to the music of a lyre. (Psalm 49:5)

כִּי הִנְנִי־בָא וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְתוֹכֵךְ נְאֻם־יְהוָה׃

For here I am, I come, and I will dwell in your midst, says Adonai. (Zechariah 2:14)

[95] Ibid., 372-373

## SECTION 4: NEW RITUALS FOR PREGNANCY, BIRTH, AND THE POSTPARTUM PERIOD

## PREGNANCY

### A *tallit* ritual for pregnancy

This five-stage ritual is based on the *Kortadura de Fashadura,* a Sephardic pregnancy ritual in which the expecting parents, friends and family cut and prepare the baby's first swaddling clothes. This ritual is intended as an experiential way for expecting parents to process the anxieties and concerns surrounding pregnancy and to mark the significant milestones in a pregnancy. At each of the four stages identified in this ritual - each corresponding to a different stage of the pregnancy - expecting parents offer a meditation/prayer before tying the *tzitzit* (ritual fringes) onto a corner of the *tallit*. There are many instructional videos on Youtube about how to tie *tzitzit*. Parents can also consult with their local Jewish clergy. Alternatively, parents could use a complete *tallit* and embroider or sew onto it at each point in the ritual that involves tying. They may also want to share with each other in their own words some of their hopes and anxieties surrounding the pregnancy. The intention behind this ritual is for the completed *tallit*, with all its symbolism, to be used to wrap the baby, *besha'ah tovah*, at the circumcision or naming ceremony.

This ritual uses the feminine Divine name in all the blessings as the ritual explicitly engages with and reflects feminine imagery. The Hebrew word for corner (like the four corners of the *tallit*) is also the same as the Hebrew word for 'wings,' as in 'The wings of the shekhinah'(*Kanfei hashekhina*). In referring to God by the female Divine name, this ritual also invokes this linguistic connection which the very last blessing explicitly expresses.

***Tzitzit* 1: Upon confirming a pregnancy:**

(Poem adapted from *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav*)

Of those whose strong hope is to bear life,
who has not prayed for divine intervention?
and so we say, (on your behalf):
may the One who gave birth to the world
grant us this wish
may my belly swell, as our heart fills
and that dream of those who come after us
comes to be.

May we know health and serenity
in our carrying;
ease and comfort in our bearing;
and may the child know how much
this is our heart's desire.[96]

For both parents: Our God and God of our ancestors, we tie these knots with trepidation and hope. We have just awakened to the dream that this soul has chosen us to be its parents. We do not know what these next months hold. We pray with the tying of these knots that this child will arrive *besha'ah tovah,* at a good time and in good health.

[96] Siddur Sha'ar Zahav, 29

For the gestational parent[97]: God who enwombs the earth,[98] grant my body health and strength so that my belly may swell with each passing month.

For the non-gestational parent: May my partner and I grow in love and compassion towards each other as we take this journey to parenthood together.

For both parents: Just as the birth chord miraculously nourishes and sustains this baby's life during pregnancy, may these ritual knots serve as a symbol of our commitment to love, protect and nourish our child.

*Parents wrap and tie the first set of tzitzit on the corner of the tallit.*

בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ שְׁכִינָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם הַמְּרַחֶמֶת עָלֵינוּ בְּאַהֲבָה

Berukhah at Shekhinah, eloheinu ruah ha'olam, hamerahemet aleinu be'ahavah.[99]

Blessed Are You, Shekhinah our God, Spirit of the Universe, who enwombs us with love.

[97] I have used the term gestational parent here to be inclusive of all genders, since not all birthing people are women.

[98] This expression is a creative translation of the phrase "Barukh Merahem Al Ha'Aretz" from the Pesukei deZimra of the morning liturgy, making a linguistic connection between the root word for compassion, ר-ח-ם, and the Hebrew word for womb. Throughout this ritual, I have tried to use poetic language that suggests birthing imagery.

[99] I have chosen to use the feminine Divine name in all the blessings as this ritual explicitly engages with and reflects feminine imagery. The Hebrew word for corner (like the four corners of the *tallit*) is also the same as the Hebrew word for 'wings,' as in 'The wings of the shekhinah'/Kanfei Shekhinah. By referring to God by the female Divine name, I'm also invoking this linguistic connection which the very last blessing explicitly expresses.

***Tzitzit 2*: Upon completing the first trimester/sharing the news with others:**

God of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah,[100]

We have breathed our first sigh of relief. We have completed our first 12 weeks of pregnancy as the tiny heart growing within _____'s womb beats strong and clear. Our child, we pray today, as we share our joy and hope with those we love, that your heart will beat stronger and clearer as you grow. Today we tie these strings as a symbol of the growing bond between us. As we wrap these sacred strings around each other, we wrap you, our child, in love, and we affirm that your soul and ours are forever intertwined in the fabric of life. We wrap you also in the love and support of our family, friends and community without whom we would not be able to become parents. While we may be your birth parents, we know that it takes a village to raise a child and pray that our village will help us raise you to Torah, sacred relationships and good deeds.

*For those couples who want to involve their immediate family (e.g. parents, siblings), family members can be invited to tie some of the knots on this *tzitzit*.

*Wrap and tie the second set of tzitzit.*

בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ שְׁכִינָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם הַמְּרַחֶמֶת עָלֵינוּ בְּאַהֲבָה.

Berukhah at Shekhinah, eloheinu ruah ha'olam, hamerahemet aleinu be'ahavah.

Blessed Are You, Shekhinah our God, Spirit of the Universe, who enwombs us with love.

[100] I have chosen to include Bilhah and Zilpah with the foremothers in recognition of the role they played in birthing and parenting Jacob's 12 sons and daughter. Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah represent the Biblical village that raised up the twelve tribes of Israel.

***Tzitzit 3*: Feeling the baby move/quickening (18-20 weeks)**

<u>For the gestational parent:</u>

This month we felt you, our child, move inside my womb for the first time. What a strange and beautiful sensation to know that the beat of your heart has moved you to dance! Our hope grows, and with it, our resolve to embrace you and keep you safe.

<u>For the non-gestational parent:</u>

You are still so small and so fragile. We tie this third set of strings as a symbol of the life that moves and grows inside this womb. As we tie these knots, we pray, our child, that with every kick and every leap you will grow bigger and stronger.

<u>For both parents:</u>

Our God and God of our ancestor Rebekah, we pray that this child will grow to be like Jacob, the one who wrestled with God, who even in his mother's womb desired to run towards Torah and towards community.[101] Bless this tiny life with strength and curiosity, so that our baby will continue growing, continue exploring and continue leaping.

*Wrap and tie the third set of tzitzit.*

בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ שְׁכִינָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם הַמְּרַחֶמֶת עָלֵינוּ בְּאַהֲבָה.

Berukhah at Shekhinah, eloheinu ruah ha'olam, hamerahemet aleinu be'ahavah.

Blessed are You, Shekhinah our God, Spirit of the Universe, who enwombs us with love.

[101] With reference to Genesis Rabbah 63, Rashi suggests in his comment on Genesis 25:22 that Isaac would run/his movements would quicken inside Rebekah's womb whenever she would walk past the Houses of Torah.

***Tzitzit 4*: The 9th month**

Eternal God, we thank you with all our heart that You have brought us in health and love and strength to this moment in our pregnancy. God who gives life, we stand humbly now on the threshold of this new life, ready to take on the responsibility of raising this soul to Torah and good deeds. In a few weeks, God willing, we will mark the journey of this child from womb to world with the severing of the umbilical cord. Today, we tie these final knots as we pray that You will grant us an easy labour and help us to bring this child safely into our arms.

<u>For the gestational parent:</u>

God, Compassionate One, grant me trust, strength and stamina to surrender to the process of birth. Give me courage and discernment to work with my birthing team as I bring forth this tiny life and help me to feel your presence in every contraction and every breath.

<u>For the non-gestational parent:</u>

God, bless me with compassion, patience and resilience as I support _____ in birthing our child. Grant me the wisdom to understand that we walk this path together, and that each contraction brings us closer to our child.

<u>Both parents</u>:

This *tallit* is now complete. Like the wings of the *shekhinah,* כנפי השכינה*,* may the four corners of this garment be for us and for this baby a symbol of God's protection and abiding presence, and a sign of our love and commitment. These strings represent our promises, our fears, and our milestones on this journey. May we soon merit the blessing of wrapping our baby in this *tallit*.

*Wrap and tie the fourth set of tzitzit.*

בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ שְׁכִינָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם הַמְּרַחֶמֶת עָלֵינוּ בְּאַהֲבָה.

Berukhah at Shekhinah, eloheinu ruah ha'olam, hamerahemet aleinu be'ahavah.

Blessed are You Shekhinah, Spirit of the Universe, who enwombs us with love.

**Wrapping the Baby in *Tallit* at the *Brit Mila/Brit Bat*:**

Adapted from Page 17 - *Lekhol Zeman ve'et* and page A42 - *More Derech*

מַה־יָּקָר חַסְדְּךָ אֱלֹהִים וּבְנֵי אָדָם בְּצֵל כְּנָפֶיךָ יֶחֱסָיוּן׃

How precious is Your loving-kindness, O God! Humankind finds refuge in the shadow of Your wings.[102]

Parents:

The *tallit* is an embracing symbol of the Covenant between God and the Jewish people, and we are reminded of the mitzvot by the *tzitzit* on its corners. Today we envelop our child into the folds of a *tallit* as a symbol of his/her/their entry into our Covenant with God and *Klal Yisrael*. These past nine months we have journeyed together and created this *tallit* together for this moment, a symbol not only of the covenant between our child and God, but between us and our child. May this *tallit* serve as a symbol of our love, commitment and protection.

Our God and God of our ancestors, we thank you for the gift of this child, and for bringing him/her/them to us in good time and in good health. May he/she/they grow to maturity embraced by God's love and the love of all who know him/her/them. May the words of Torah surround

[102] Psalm 36:8

him/her/them. Clothed in majesty and honour, may he/she/they always look to the future with joy. May the Shekhinah, God's sheltering presence, be with our precious child always.

*The child is wrapped in the tallit.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם זוֹכֵר הַבְּרִית בְּעֲטִיפָה בַּצִּיצִית.

Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, zokher habrit ba'atifah batzitzit.

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of the Universe, Who remembers the Covenant through the wrapping of a *tallit*.

בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ שְׁכִינָה הַשּׁוֹמֶרֶת נַפְשׁוֹתֵינוּ תַּחַת כְּנָפֶיהָ.

Berukhah at Shekhinah, hashomeret nafshoteinu tahat kenafeha.

Blessed are You, Shekhinah, who shelters us beneath Her wings.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֶחֱיָנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לַזְּמַן הַזֶּה.

Barukh atah, Adonai eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, sheheheyanu, vekiyemanu, vehigiy'anu lazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

## BIRTH

### A challah, candle and water ritual for birth

This ritual, like birth itself, takes place in three stages, each corresponding to a different stage of labour. This ritual might be considered part of a couple's "spiritual birth plan" that they can prepare a couple of months in advance, with the ritual items packed into the hospital bag for those choosing to give birth in a hospital. A challah can be made or purchased in advance and frozen until labour begins, and a candle and kiddush cup can also be purchased in advance. This ritual is designed for a vaginal birth, but can be adapted in the event of Caesarean Section. Though I recognise the unpredictability of labour and birth, I hope that this ritual can be used in part or in whole to mark the experience of labour. This ritual makes use of candles, challah and water as a way of protesting the rabbis' assertion that women die in childbirth because they neglect the mitzvot of candles, challah and mikveh.

**At the onset of contractions,** both partners should light a candle. Ideally, it should be a candle that can burn for the duration of labour, so at least a 48 hour candle. Alternatively, couples may choose to use an electric candle for safety reasons.

*Singing:*

כִּי־עִמְּךָ מְקוֹר חַיִּים בְּאוֹרְךָ נִרְאֶה־אוֹר׃

With You is the source of life;

by Your light do we see light.[103]

Eternal God, we pray with the kindling of this light that you will grant us strength, resilience and courage as labour begins. We face the unknown hours ahead of us with humility and hope. Just

[103] Psalm 36:10

as you created the world with an act of contraction, *tzimtzum*, help us to understand that each contraction brings us closer to our baby. Grant our birth team the wisdom to guide us gently through this process and the empathy to listen to our needs and desires. May we soon merit to hold new life in our arms.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי מְקוֹר הַחַיִים וְהָאוֹר.

Barukh atah Adonai mekor hahayyim veha'or

Blessed are You, Eternal, Source of Life and Light.

**When the child is born:**

הַזֹּרְעִים בְּדִמְעָה בְּרִנָּה יִקְצֹרוּ:

Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.[104]

Source of Life, thank You for the blessing of this child, for the great joy that has come in the wake of pain. You are a God who is good and does good. We do not take for granted the responsibility you have bestowed on us to care for this baby. As you have provided for us, so may we provide for our child.

*Each parent tears a piece of challah from the loaf and eats a piece of challah.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַמּוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha'olam hamotzi lehem min ha'aretz

Blessed are You Eternal, who brings forth bread from the earth.

[104] Psalm 126:5. This psalm is traditionally associated with labour, with the understanding that this verse is a reference to the pain of childbirth leading to the joy of birth. Parents can choose to sing this to the melody by Debbie Friedman.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַמּוֹצִיא חַיִּים מִן הָרֶחֶם.

Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha‘olam hamotzi hayyim min harehem.

Blessed are You, Eternal, who brings forth life from the womb.

**After delivery of the placenta:**

*Holding up a kiddush cup filled with water:*

With water You sustain life, with water You cleanse. As we drink of this water, we give gratitude for the birth waters that sustained our baby inside the womb. We remember the primordial waters with which you shaped the earth. And we are reminded of Miriam’s well that sustained the Israelites in their wandering. Today our cup overflows with the blessing of life, the blessing of love, the blessing of creation.

*Each partner gives the other a sip from the cup.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי בּוֹרֵא מַיִם חַיִּים.

Barukh atah Adonai bore mayyim hayyim.

Blessed are You, Creator of Living Waters.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהֶחֱיָנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לַזְּמַן הַזֶּה:

Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha'olam, sheheheyanu, vekiyemanu, vehigiy‘anu lazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

**A Short Hallel Ritual for the Birth of a Baby**

The verses in this ritual come from the psalms of Hallel, Judaism's gratitude liturgy. All those present for the birth can be invited to share their gratitude at the two different points in the ritual.

**When the parents first hold their new baby:**

בָּרוּךְ הַבָּא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה בֵּרַכְנוּכֶם מִבֵּית יְהוָה׃

Blessed is the one who enters in the name of the Eternal; we bless you from the House of the Eternal.[105]

זֶה־הַיּוֹם עָשָׂה יְהוָה נָגִילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בוֹ׃

This is the day that the Eternal has made—

let us exult and rejoice on it.[106]

We give thanks to You, Source of Life, for safely bringing our child into the world.

We give thanks for the miracle of the human body, for sustaining and birthing this new life.

We give thanks to our birth team, for their wisdom, skill and support.

We give thanks to one another, for love and partnership.

We give thanks to this child, for choosing us to be his/her/their parents.

We give thanks to…for…

הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה כִּי־טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ׃

Give thanks to the Eternal, for God is good. God's loving-kindness is eternal![107]

[105] Psalm 118:26
[106] Psalm 118:24
[107] Psalm 118:29

**When cutting the umbilical cord**

מִן־הַמֵּצַר קָרָאתִי יָהּ עָנָנִי בַמֶּרְחָב יָהּ: יְהוָה לִי לֹא אִירָא מַה־יַּעֲשֶׂה לִי אָדָם:

From the narrow place I called out to Yah, Yah answered me from the expanse. The Eternal is mine, I have no fear; what can a human do to me?[108]

We give thanks, Source of Life, for this baby in our hands.

We give thanks, Source of Wisdom, for the organ that in the womb sustained him/her/them.

We give thanks, Source of Light, for the breath that now maintains __

We give thanks, Source of Love, for the cord that we sever.

And we give thanks, Source of  Strength, for the privilege to raise __.

We give thanks… for…

הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה כִּי־טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ:

Give thanks to the Eternal, for God is good. God's loving-kindness is eternal![109]

בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ שְׁכִינָה הַטּוֹבָה וְהַמֵּטִיבָה.

Berukha at Shekhinah, hatovah vehametivah.

Blessed are You, Shekhinah, who is good and does good.

[108] Psalm 118:5-6
[109] Psalm 118:29

## POSTPARTUM

### A tree-planting ritual for burying the placenta:

This ritual is designed to be included as an add-on to a *brit milah* or *brit bat* ceremony, though it can also be celebrated as a stand-alone ritual. This ritual can also be adapted to exclude the burial of the placenta. If the placenta is going to be buried, it is advisable to situate this ritual at the home of the family. If the placenta will not be buried, an alternative location can be found for planting the tree - perhaps the synagogue, or a local park.

בָּרוּךְ הַבָּא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה בֵּרַכְנוּכֶם מִבֵּית יְהוָה׃

Blessed is the One who enters in the name of the Eternal;

we bless you from the House of the Eternal.[110]

We are gathered here today to celebrate the birth of our baby, _____. We also honour the Source of Life that has given us life, sustained us and allowed us to reach this moment. God works in mysterious and miraculous ways, sustaining life during pregnancy through the placenta. As we celebrate this new life, we also mark its separation from this miraculous organ, nature's very own Tree of Life, *etz hayyim*. Jewish tradition teaches us that Torah is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it. Today, we pray that our child, _____, will find comfort, strength and sustenance in words of Torah and Jewish community, just as she/he/they once found in this placenta.

[110] Psalm 118:26

*The placenta is placed in the earth as we sing Etz Hayyim Hi.*

עֵץ־חַיִּים הִיא לַמַּחֲזִיקִים בָּהּ וְתֹמְכֶיהָ מְאֻשָּׁר׃ דְּרָכֶיהָ דַרְכֵי־נֹעַם וְכָל־נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שָׁלוֹם׃

She is a tree of life to those who hold fast to her, and all of her supporters are happy. Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace.[111]

*There is space now for the birthing person to offer personal words of gratitude for the placenta before the recitation of Asher Yatzar.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּחָכְמָה וּבָרָא בוֹ נְקָבִים נְקָבִים חֲלוּלִים חֲלוּלִים גָּלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לִפְנֵי כִסֵּא כְבוֹדֶךָ שֶׁאִם יִפָּתֵחַ אֶחָד מֵהֶם אוֹ יִסָּתֵם אֶחָד מֵהֶם אִי אֶפְשַׁר לְהִתְקַיֵּם וְלַעֲמֹד לְפָנֶיךָ. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה רוֹפֵא כָל־בָּשָׂר וּמַפְלִיא לַעֲשׂוֹת׃

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of the universe, who formed the human body with wisdom, creating the body's many pathways and openings. It is well known before Your throne of glory that if one of them be wrongly opened or closed, it would be impossible to endure and stand before You. Blessed are You, Adonai, who heals all flesh, working wondrously.

*All present respond:* Amen.

*[parents]* The Talmud teaches us that it was customary when a child was born to plant a tree - pine for a girl and cedar for a boy. When the child grew up and got married, they would cut down the trees and build the *huppah* from them.[112] And though we hope never to cut down this tree,

[111] Proverbs 3:17-18
[112]BT Gittin 57a

that it may sustain you and the future branches of our family tree, we pray that it may always be a symbol of what we hope for you, our child:

וְהָיָה כְּעֵץ שָׁתוּל עַל־פַּלְגֵי מָיִם אֲשֶׁר פִּרְיוֹ יִתֵּן בְּעִתּוֹ וְעָלֵהוּ לֹא־יִבּוֹל וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר־יַעֲשֶׂה יַצְלִיחַ:[113]

May your roots grow deep

May you always stand up tall

May the branches of your tree reach wide

May you be well-nourished by your community

May you blossom in everything you do

And may you be a source of shelter and comfort to others

*If the child's naming is being included in this ritual, the parents can share the name and explanation at this point.*

As we have brought you into the sacred covenant of the Jewish people, so may we merit to lead you to a life filled with Torah, sacred relationships, and good deeds.

*A sapling is planted over the placenta. All present are invited to shovel soil over the roots.*

בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ שְׁכִינָה מְקוֹר הָחַיִּים.

Berukha at Shekhinah mekor hahayyim.

Blessed are You, Shekhina, Source of Life.

[113] Psalm 1:3

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהֶחֱיָנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לַזְּמַן הַזֶּה׃

Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha‘olam, sheheheyanu, vekiyemanu, vehigiy‘anu lazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

**A Havdalah Weaning Ritual**

This ritual should take place on a Saturday evening sometime soon after the baby has tasted its first food and begun to eat solids. If the parent is continuing to nurse the baby, this ritual can take place when the parent decides to stop breastfeeding the child. This ritual should take place in the presence of family, with the first section particularly in the presence of women (mothers, grandmothers, sisters, close friends) who have supported the nursing mother.

וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּגָּמַל וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מִשְׁתֶּה גָּדוֹל בְּיוֹם הִגָּמֵל אֶת־יִצְחָק׃

The child grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.[114]

The Torah teaches us that Abraham and Sarah celebrated Isaac's weaning with a great feast. Though we don't know what that celebration looked like, we do know that the milestone of weaning is something our tradition invites us to honour and to celebrate. So today, we celebrate that _____ no longer needs to be nursed. We honour _____'s burgeoning independence and we give gratitude for the miracle of breastmilk that has nurtured and sustained _____ until now. We honour both the joy and the loss that comes with this transition, as those intimate moments of nursing begin to decrease. We mark this transition and this separation through the language of Havdalah, Judaism's ritual for separation and differentiation. Though we separate, we will always be connected.

*Havdalah Blessings*

[114] Genesis 21:8

*Now is an opportunity for the nursing parent to share their experiences around nursing - what it has meant to them and the feelings that accompany this transition.*

בָּרוּךְ אָתָּה אֵל שַׁדַּי, שֶׁמִּילֵּא אֶת שַׁדַּי לָתֵת לִי לְהָנִיק וְעַכשָׁיו מַפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵין תִּינוֹק\ת שֶׁלִּי.

Barukh atah, El Shaddai, shemillei et shaddai latet li lehanik veakhshav mafrid beini uvein tinok/et sheli.

Blessed are You, El Shaddai, who filled my breasts to enable me to nurse and now separates me from my baby.[115]

*Those present now offer a blessing or wish to the nursing parent at this moment of transition. The singing of a niggun (wordless song) can help make the transition into the next step of the ritual.*

יַרְכִּבֵהוּ בָּמֳתֵי אָרֶץ וַיֹּאכַל תְּנוּבֹת שָׂדָי וַיֵּנִקֵהוּ דְבַשׁ מִסֶּלַע וְשֶׁמֶן מֵחַלְמִישׁ צוּר׃

[God] set them atop the highlands, To feast on the yield of the earth; Nursing them with honey from the crag, And oil from the flinty rock[116]

We now offer our child, _____, this solid food as a symbol of our continued commitment to nourishing and raising him/her/them. Honey has long been a symbol of

[115] El Shaddai, one of God's many names, can literally be translated as "God of my breasts." This name appears in the Tankah when biblical characters undergo some kind of transformation connected to a journey. See Genesis 17:1; Genesis 28:3; Ruth 1:20

[116] Deuteronomy 32:13 speaks about God nursing the Israelites with honey

sustenance and abundance in our tradition, and though you are still too young to enjoy the sweetness of honey, we offer you a sweet vegetable as a symbol of the blessings that we hope for you.[117] We pray that you _____ (baby's name), will be blessed with an abundance of sweetness, goodness and health and that you will always find strength, comfort and support in those who love you.

*The non-nursing parent offers the child a spoonful of mashed sweet potato or carrot.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה.

Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha'olam bore peri ha'adamah.

Blessed are You Eternal, Creator of the fruit of the earth.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהֶחֱיָנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לַזְּמַן הַזֶּה:

Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha'olam, sheheheyanu, vekiyemanu, vehigiy'anu lazman hazeh.

*Friends and family can now sit down to a festive meal.*

[117] Babies under one year old should not consume honey. If this ritual takes place after the child's first birthday, honey can be used instead of sweet potato or carrot.

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