

# Jewish Prayers for the Birthing Experience

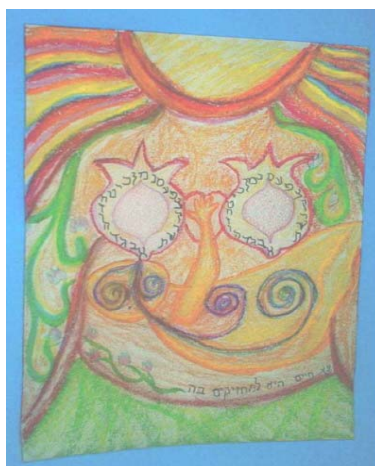
In the waters of the mother  
comes the voyage.  
Down canals to the ocean deep in the maternal sea  
Home to the sea  
in me.

– Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Motherprayer*

Presented here are Jewish prayers related to birth. Many parents find the moments and trials surrounding pregnancy and birth beyond words, as we enter the unknown reality or transformation and emotions, an experience of coming up close to the infinite mysteries of life and the Creator.

Sometimes a word, phrase or image can direct our intention or concentration to sanctify a unique moment. Prayers and blessings for birth, like the traditional prayers for healing, are emerging to help us find strength and support through this time that can be joyful and auspicious as well as challenging and dangerous. Metaphors of water, trees, ripening fruit, opening gates, the key to the womb and life, and more abound in folk practices and prayers to deepen our experience.

One medieval commentary simply says, “We don’t know what to say to you, but the One who answered your mother at the time of her troubles, this One will answer you at the time of yours.”



*First Torah* by Yonit Lea Kosovske<sup>1</sup>

עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה

*Eitz chayim hee la-machazikim bah*

She is a Tree of Life to them that hold fast to her

קמתי אני לפתוח לדודי

*Kamti ani lifto-ach l'dodi*

I will open to you my beloved, will you open, open for me

פתחו לי שערי צדק, אבוא בם אודה יה

*Pitchu li sha'arei tzedek, avo vam odeh Yah*

Open for me the gates of righteousness,

I will go through them, I will thank God

Prayers during labor, to say by the woman  
or by her partner or helpers:

Here is a *techinah*, a prayer written in Yiddish by Jewish women in Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> This prayer portrays God as the sole keeper of the key to life and birth.

Master of the Universe,  
we come before You with hearts breaking-open  
and eyes overflowing with tears,  
for \_\_\_\_\_ *bat* (daughter of) \_\_\_\_\_  
now in labor and giving birth.  
Good and merciful God,  
please have compassion on her,  
that she should give birth very quickly and easily,  
without trouble or pain.  
Behold, the key of life is in Your hand alone,  
and Your mercy on every creature,  
so, have mercy on her, help her,  
and respond to our tears  
pouring out for her sake,  
for the gates of tears are never locked!

The following Chasidic prayer calls upon birth-related names of God.<sup>3</sup> This prayer includes delivery of the placenta (שליה *"shilya"* in Hebrew). Some women today are renewing a Jewish custom of saving the placenta to bury in the earth some time after the child is born, often planting a tree over it.

May it be Your will God, our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham,  
God of Isaac, God of Jacob, the great, mighty and awesome God, whose  
names are also אהיה אשר אהיה *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, "I will be that which I  
am becoming" and שדי צבאות *Shaddai Tz'va-ot*, Almighty Nurturer of Hosts,  
that You act for the sake of Your great compassion, which comes from the  
word for womb.

Show womb-mercy on \_\_\_\_\_ *bat* (daughter of) \_\_\_\_\_  
whose waters are breaking, who calls from her contractions. God full of  
compassion, bring her from darkness to light.

In the merit of our holy mothers, Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachel and Leah, have  
mercy and remember her for goodness, deliver her for blessing, for her eyes  
depend on you like a maidservant's upon her mistress.

Nullify any harsh decrees, and save her from all sorrow, that the birthling go  
forth to a life of goodness and peace, at the right and blessed time for him or  
her and for us.

And afterward, may the placenta deliver easily.

May the one who answered the mother of King David, the writer of Psalms,  
answer me! May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be  
acceptable unto you God, my Rock and my Redeemer.

### Upon meeting your child for the first time:

Traditionally the *Hatov V'Hameitiv* blessing is recited for a boy and the *She'hechiyanu* is said for a girl; some say one or both blessings regardless of the baby's sex:

**בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַטּוֹב וְהַמֵּטִיב.**

*Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, hatov v'hameitiv.*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Majesty of the universe,  
the One who is goodness and who makes goodness.

**בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַחַיָּנוּ וְקִיָּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לַזְמַן הַזֶּה.**

*Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam,  
she'hechiyanu v'kiyamanu v'higiyanu la-zman ha-zeh.*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Majesty of the universe,  
who has caused us to live, sustained us and enabled us to reach this time.

### A Prayer of Thanks for a healthy delivery or upon adoption:<sup>4</sup>

"And Hannah returned to Shilah and said: I am the woman who stood here a year ago praying to God, **אל הנער הזה התפללתי**, 'El ha-na'ar ha-zeh hit'palalti, This is the child for which I prayed, and God has granted my request.' " (1 Samuel 1:26-27)

Just as you answered our mother Hannah long ago, God, so You have answered us.  
You saw us through dark hours and brought us to this time of light.

Thank you God for being with us, and for giving us this child of our dreams.

May it be Your will, God, God of our mothers and fathers, and God of our child, that  
You again act with graciousness and mercy for all those who seek the blessings of a  
child, and all women who experience the pains of labor.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable unto You,  
our Rock and our Deliverer.

### Prayer for Nursing for the first time:

This is a prayer to be said by a woman the first time she nurses her infant. It comes from an Italian Jewish woman's prayerbook written in 1786.<sup>5</sup>

יְהי רָצוֹן מִלְפָּנֶיךָ יי אֱלֹהֵי וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי וְאֱלֹהֵי אִמּוֹתַי שֶׁתִּזְמִין מִזּוֹן עֲבָדְךָ  
הַתִּינוֹק הַזֶּה בְּרַבּוּי חֶלֶב דִּי מַחֲסוּרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִחְסֹר לוֹ.  
וְשִׁים בְּלִבִּי הָעֵת שֶׁצָּרִיךְ לְהִנִּיקָהּ כְּדִי לִתֵּת לוֹ.  
וְהַקֵּל מֵעָלַי הַשָּׁנָה וּבָעֵת שֶׁיִּבְכֶּה פֶּתַח אֲזִנִּי כְּדִי לִשְׁמָעוֹ מִדֹּ.  
וְהַצִּילֵנִי שֶׁלֹּא תִפּוֹל יָדִי עָלָיו בְּעֵת הַשָּׁנָה וַיָּמוּת חֵס וְשָׁלוֹם.  
יְהִיו לְרָצוֹן אֲמָרֵי-פִי וְהִגִּיוֹן לִבִּי לְפָנֶיךָ יי צוּרִי וְגּוֹאֲלִי.

May it be Your will, Lord my God and God of my forebears, that you provide nourishment for Your humble creation, this tiny child, and plenty of milk, as much as this baby needs.

Give me the disposition and inclination to find the time to nurse patiently until the baby is satisfied.

Cause me to sleep lightly so that the moment it cries I will hear and respond.

Spare me the horror of accidentally smothering my child while I sleep, God forbid.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, my Rock and my Redeemer.

### A modern blessing for nursing:<sup>6</sup>

בְּרוּכָה אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מַלְכַת הָעוֹלָם,  
שֶׁעָשִׂיתָנִי מְנִיקָה וּמְזִינָה  
מֵעֵשֶׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית, בְּאַהֲבָה.

*Bruchah at Yah Eloheinu Malkat ha-olam,  
she-asatni meinikah u'meizinah  
ma'asei b'reishit, b'ahavah.*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Majesty of the universe,  
who has made me one who nurses and nourishes  
the work of creation, with love.

“Behold, I extend peace to her like a river,  
and the beauty of nations like an overflowing stream.  
You will be suckled and carried on the hip and fondled on the knees.  
As a mother comforts her child, so too will I comfort you.”

– Isaiah 66:11-13

### A Prayer during Difficult Labor or for a Caesarian Delivery:

This is a passionate Chasidic prayer. It plays creatively with the Hebrew letters to envision how the womb can open quickly to release the mother from pain.<sup>7</sup>

תְּמַלֵּא רַחֲמִים עַל כָּל הַיּוֹשֵׁבוֹת עַל הַמִּשְׁבֵּר, וְתַצִּילֵם מִכָּל צָעַר וְנֹזֶק,  
וּבְפֶרֶט \_\_\_\_\_ בַּת \_\_\_\_\_.

רְבוּנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, מָלֵא רַחֲמִים רַבִּים תָּמִיד,  
אַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ אֶת צָעְרָהּ וּמְכַאוֹתֶיהָ,  
אַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ אֶת לִבָּהּ וּלְבַב אֲבִיהָ וְאִמָּהּ וְכָל הַמַּצְטָעִרִים בְּצָרָתָהּ.  
יַעֲזֹרֶנּוּ רַחֲמֶיךָ הָעֲצוּמִים, עַל עֲנִיָּה זֹאת הַיּוֹשֵׁבֶת עַל הַמִּשְׁבֵּר,  
וּפְתַח לָהּ שַׁעְרֵי הָרַחֲמִים וְהַחֲסֵד וְהַחֲמִלָּה וְהַחֲנִינָה.

פְּתַח לָהּ שַׁעַר הַהוֹלָדָה!  
וּבְרַחֲמִים הָרַבִּים, תַּחַתְךָ אֶת הַמַּ"ם סְתוּמָהּ, שֶׁשֵּׁם מְלַבֵּשׁ הוֹלָד,  
וְתַעֲשֶׂה מִמָּנָה שְׁתֵּי דָלֶתִי"ם, דָּלֶתִי בְטָנָהּ!

וְתֵלַד מִיָּד בְּקֶל, וְתוֹצִיא הוֹלָד לְשָׁלוֹם לְאֹוִיר הָעוֹלָם, לְחַיִּים וּלְשָׁלוֹם וּלְאֶרֶץ יָמִים  
וְשָׁנִים טוֹבִים,  
אָמֵן.

Pour compassion on all women in labor, save them from every sorrow and damage,  
and in particular \_\_\_\_\_ bat (daughter of) \_\_\_\_\_.

Master of the Universe, full of great compassion (wombs) always, you knew her trouble  
and her pain, you knew her heart and the heart of her father and her mother  
and all those who worry on her behalf; let your great mercy be awakened, for  
this birthing woman, and open for her the gates of mercy and lovingkindness  
and goodness and grace.

Open for her the gate of birth!

With great compassion cut open the closed “*Mem*” (the Hebrew letter that looks like  
this: **מ**, symbolizing the sealed womb), which “clothes” the child,  
and make this closed “*Mem*” into two “*Dalets*” (the letter that looks like this: **ד**, which  
literally mean “doors”) – the doors of her belly!

Let her give birth immediately with ease, and bring forth the child in peace to the air of  
the world, for life, for peace and for length of days and years, Amen.

### A Prayer for the NICU:

Sometimes a baby has to spend time in the neo-natal intensive care unit. One mother of twins said  
this prayer every time she visited the NICU, and then it became her nightly prayer over each child:<sup>8</sup>

Shechinah, Holy Mother, bless my child \_\_\_\_\_ .  
Protect him/her and shelter him/her beneath your wings.  
Help him/her to rest easy, help him/her to breathe freely.  
Help him/her to grow strong.  
Grant him/her a long, healthy life of deep and abundant joy.

מן המצר קראתי יה, ענני במרחב יה!  
*Min ha-meitzar karati Yah, Anani ba-merchav Yah*  
From the dire straits I called out to God,  
S/He answered me, in the great expansiveness of the Holy One!

May you be inspired to know  
the pulsating reserves of your presence awaiting  
you on the other side.

– Ahrona Joy Golden, “*Bridging Worlds*”

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Yonit Lea Kosovske, “First Torah,” <http://www.jewishpregnancy.org>, writes, “This image came to me when I first heard the expression that a mother gives a child its first Torah. There is also a saying that a mother is a child’s first earth. ... Here, the letter Aleph represents the Divine energy behind all creation and it is entering the baby at both her first breath and first drink of its mother’s colostrum, the ‘mannah’ sent to sustain us.”

<sup>2</sup> David Haim Zilbershlag, *Sefer Techinot B’lashon Hakodesh*.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Dovid Simcha Rosenthal, ed. *A Joyful Mother of Children: A Compilation of Prayers, Suggestions, and Laws for the Jewish Expectant Family* (Brooklyn: Feldheim Publishers) 1982, pg. 41. This prayer is taken from *Sefer Avodat HaKodesh*, translated here by Raquel S. Kosovske.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, *Tears of Sorrow, Seeds of Hope: A Jewish Spiritual Companion for Infertility and Pregnancy Loss* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing), 1999, pg. 131.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, ed. and trans., *Out of the Depths I Call to You: A Book of Prayers for the Married Jewish Woman* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc.) 1992, pp. 110-111.

<sup>6</sup> Nursing prayer adapted by Raquel S. Kosovske with permission from Deborah Burg-Schnirman, “Weaning Ceremony,” <http://www.ritualwell.org>.

<sup>7</sup> *Likutei Tefillot* (Israel: Keren R’ Yisrael Dov Odsor Publishers) Section 1:30, page 323. An abbreviated version is printed here, translated by Raquel S. Kosovske. This prayer was read aloud during my emergency caesarian birth of my son, Chanina, by my birthing partner. We had not proof-read the prayer before and were amazed afterwards, realizing its imagery: opening up the closed letter “Mem” (a Kabbalistic metaphor for the womb) to make two daled-letter “doors”!

<sup>8</sup> Franci Levine Grater, in Sandy Falk and Daniel Judson, *The Jewish Pregnancy Book* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing), 2004, pg. 61.

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