



JEWISH PERSPECTIVES ON PREGNANCY AND LABOR

Teachings by Chani Newman - a Chasidic hypnobirthing instructor teaches an online course (or in person for those in New York). I took this course and highly recommend it. She and I come from different approaches (Chasidic to Secular Humanist) but she is knowledgeable and a great source of traditional wisdom. Like me, you can take from it what you wish.

Some of her teachings:

Goal: Appreciate the Greatness of Pregnancy and Labor!

Goal: Feel more “present” while pregnant and in labor. Feel closer to G-d.

1. G-d is closer to pregnant women than to others
2. Every new Soul brought into the world brings Rectification
3. Being pregnant is like being a walking Beit Midrash (House of Study)
4. Pregnancy is a miracle
5. Childbirth is compared to the national Exile and Redemption

ישעיהו יג

ח וְנִבְּהָלוּ צִירִים וְחִבָּלִים יִאֲחָזוּן כִּי־יֵלְדָה יִחִילֹן אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ יִתְמָהוּ פָנָי לְהִבִּים פְּנֵיהֶם

- (8) They will be confounded; aches and pains will seize them; they will be in travail like a woman in childbirth. Each man will be astonished at his friend; their faces are faces of flame.

ישעיהו יד

ז בְּטָרֶם תַּחֲלִיל יֵלְדָה בְּטָרֶם יָבֹא חִבָּל לָהּ וְהִמְלִיטָה זָכָר

ח מי שִׁמַּע כְּזֹאת מִי רָאָה כְּאֵלֶּה הַיּוֹחֵל אֶרֶץ בַּיּוֹם אֶחָד אִם יוֹלֵד גּוֹי פְּעַם אַחַת כִּי חָלָה גַּם יוֹלְדָה צִיּוֹן אֶת בְּנֶיהָ

ט הֶאֱנִי אֲשַׁבֵּיר וְלֹא אוֹלִיד יֹאמֶר יְהוָה אִם אֲנִי הַמוֹלִיד וְעֲצַרְתִּי אֲמַר אֱלֹהֵינוּ

(7) Before she even feels her labor pains she will give birth; before any travail comes to her she will deliver a son!

(8) Who has heard such as this? Who has seen such as these? Has a land ever gone through its labor in one day? Has a nation ever been born at one time, as Zion went through her labor and gave birth to her children?

(9) 'Shall I bring [a woman] to the birthstool and not have her give birth?' says G-d, 'Shall I, Who causes birth, hold it back?' Says your Lord.

הוֹשַׁע יג

יג חֲבִלִי יוֹלְדָה יִבְאוּ לוֹ הוּא בֶן לֹא חָכָם כִּי עֵת לֹא יַעֲמֹד בְּמִשְׁבֵּר בָּנִים

(13) The pangs of childbirth will come upon him; he is an unwise child, for he should not stay long at the children's birthstool.

The above is from Isaiah, which flips the meaning from Genesis when Eve's "sin" condemns all women to pain in childbirth.

Isaiah takes labour as a metaphor for exile and redemption. So too, the metaphor of exile and redemption is useful for women in labour. We suffer, like those in exile suffered, but there is redemption at the end of the long hard road. This works in both directions, as there is there beauty in the metaphor of birth for the nation that is exiled. We can be reborn. As the Jewish woman labours and delivers her baby, she finds her own redemption and contributes to that of her people; the nation (from the Latin Natio - to be born) is born through women.

Our main narrative of exile is found in the book of Exodus. Here are some of the ways the story can be understood as a narrative about birth:

- The story of Moses begins with the midwives, Shifrah and Puah, catching Moses and defying the order to execute him.
- The desire of the Israelites to "get out" reminds a woman in labour of the baby trying to do the same.

- Parting the Red Sea as metaphor for birth
- The challenge of exile is not knowing when redemption will come but can take comfort in knowing it will come... like birth
- Even like being overdue - hot and tired/exhausted - it's the experience of being in exile
- Wandering in the desert for 40 years compared with 40 weeks of pregnancy
- Belief in messiah/a temple - belief in the endpoint

And so being pregnant and in labour is a microcosm of national experience -- makes you closer to the people

Experience of pregnancy is meaningful in itself -- and if you feel ready to be done it means there's more to gain for baby/woman - just like our exilic experience is meaningful too... cultural connections and learnings picked up along the way. There is beauty in the struggle

National experience can inform individual experience and individual experience can help connect to national experience

More metaphors:

The Talmud says that a child in utero is studying Torah. There are Jewish meditations/mindfulness exercises to do in labour: the baby with a torchlight, studying and learning, knowing all of Torah intuitively, inherently, before coming into the world.

-Kabbalah - the story of creation is that God had to contract to make space for the world. When women in labour are "contracting," we make space for creation of the child, a world unto himself or herself

-The Talmudic belief that if you end a life it's as though you've destroyed a world/universe, extends to the understanding that each person is their own universe. Birthing a person is birthing a new world

-A woman being pregnant is like a beit midrash (house of study). This is a talmudic idea. The beit midrash is the central location of expounding on god's laws and focusing on lofty matters. The Talmud says the child inside the womb is studying the Torah - lofty matters from within. Some labouring women do visualizations... in uterus a candle is lit, dark red walls made of maternal muscle, the baby folded, placenta pulsating, the soul hovers near its body and understands all that is spiritual and the whole Torah

Chapters of Tehillim/Psalms

20

100

1-4, 20-24, 33, 47, 72, 86, 90-91, 104, 112-150 -Reccomended by Chassidic sage, the Tzemach Tzedek (Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, 1789-1866)

Verses

”ותאמרנה המילדות אל פרעה כי לא כנשים המצריות העבריות, כי חיות הנה. בטרם תבוא עליהן המילדת וילדו (שמות א:יט)”

“And the midwives said to Pharaoh, for the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are *chayot*. Before the midwives come to them, they have given birth!” (Exodus 1:19)

”וירדו כל עבדיך אלה אלי, והשתחוו לי לאמור צא אתה וכל העם אשר ברגליך ואחרי כן אצא ויצא מעם פרעה בחרי אף (שמות יא:ח)”

“And all these servants of yours will go down to me, and they will bow down to me, saying, ‘Go out, you and all your nation that follows you,’ and afterward I will go out. And he went out from before Pharaoh in a burning anger.” (Exodus 11:8)

”גם כי אלך בגיא צלמות לא אירא רע כי אתה עמדי (תהילים כג:ד)”

“Though I walk in the valley overshadowed by death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.” (Psalms 23:4)

”פתחו לי שערי צדק אבוא בם אודה קה זה השער לה” צדיקים יבואו בו (תהילים קיח:יט)”

“Open for me the gates of righteousness. I will enter them, and thank G-d. This is the gate to G-d, the righteous will enter through it.” (Psalms 118:19)

“באו בנים עד משבר וכח אין ללידה (ישעיהו לז:ג)”

“[We are like] babies who have entered the birth canal (lit. the children came to the birthstool,) but [the mother] had no strength for deliver.” (Isaiah 37:3)

נשמת כל חי - Prayer from Shabbat morning liturgy

Segulot - these are customs/folk traditions many Jewish communities (particularly Chasidic) have practiced or do practice. Note: it is believed that doing some of these will ameliorate the “sin” of Eve and thus lead to less pain in childbirth.

סגולות Segulot

Be extra careful with hechsherim

Don't go to impure or smelly places

Go to places of kedusha and see talmidei chachamim

Don't become angry

Have a copy of the sefer Raziel HaMalach in your house

Don't step on cut finger/toenails

Eat apples

Don't eat radishes and other sharp foods

Don't go to a cemetery

As a Talmid Chacham who is a Kohen to daven for you, especially at

Birchat Kohanim

Do Hafrashat Challah

Hatarat nedarim

9th month: Husband should do 'Pesicha' (open Aron Kodesh) at Torah

Reading time

9th month: check mezuzahs

9th month: Be tovel in mikveh without a bracha

If breech: Make sure all your seforim are right-side up

Give 18 cents to tzedaka before Shabbos/yom tov

Give tzedaka during labor

Right after baby is born when they wrap the baby, put something holy on it
Dance, clap

Jewish colors meditation:

Jewish Color Visualization

Gently close your eyes and let yourself settle into your seat, as you release all tension in your muscles and let them relax. Imagine yourself on a beautiful mist of violet. The soft violet that puts your mind at ease. Violet in Hebrew is argaman, and represents the noble human element, a mixture of animal red and heavenly blue. Because violet is the perfect color for people, it relates to the special abilities G-d gave us to use in this world. G-d put in women the natural ability to give birth, and the potential to infuse it with spiritual significance. In realizing this, a sense of confidence, calm, and meaning fills you. Breathe in the spiritual mist of violet and know that you can trust G-d and the body He gave you to guide you through this birth. Rely on G-d. Envision the words, "In the name of G-d, the Lord of Israel, may [the angel] Michoel be at my right, Gabriel at my left, Uriel before me, and Raphael behind me; and above my head the Presence of G-d."

בשם ה' אלוקי ישראל מימיני מיכאל ומשמאלי גבריאל ומלפני אוריאל ומאחורי רפאל ועל ראשי שכינת אל. Hashem is surrounding you with angels. Uriel, envision alef. Refael, envision reish. Gavriel, envision gimmel. Michoel, envision mem. And the final angel is Nuriel, envision nun. The angels spell Argaman, your protective mist of violet, with G-d Himself overseeing it all from above. Even if you made mistakes taking care of your baby or your body while you were pregnant, now is the time to let go of those regrets. Mistakes are a result of free choice, that unique present G-d gave only to humans, who are symbolized by purple. But violet is also the color of the copper altar of the Temple, the place where sacrifices were brought to obtain atonement. Imagine in your mind's eye, the tall, square altar, at the edge of its long ramp, covered in a beautiful violet cloth, just as it was covered when The

Jewish People of old travelled in the desert. Place all your regrets on the cloth. All those regrets and doubts concerning your birthing dissolve, as you move forward as a proactive and protective parent, making decisions that you know are right for your baby and yourself.

Picture yourself, now, within a mist of vibrant blue, and feel your throat and neck relax. The throat and neck relate to the color blue, so breathe in the blue mist of relaxation, and feel all the tension in the area of the neck and throat just melt away. Blue represents G-d's trait of *Malchut*, or kingliness, which relates to the mouth and the female natured Divine Presence.

Women are given a special gift of speech, and the energy of blue helps you find your voice and learn to speak clearly and with confidence to express your womanly wisdom, and to ask questions. You resolve to use your power of speech to speak words of Torah and encouragement to your baby, and to be the spokesperson for yourself and this tiny dependant being you are carrying.

The trait of kingliness also is symbolized by the womb. It is an all-encompassing trait, and as a king rules over all, so does your womb encompass an entire new person's body, your baby. Malchut also contains an element of passivity, and your womb, too, is passive and calm, as you refrain from imposing your will too much, and allow yourself to be a pipeline for a new soul to come through. Blue is a passive color, and the blue mist around you soothes the muscles of your womb so it can do its job and lead the baby out.

Now, in your mind's eye, envision yourself surrounded by a mist of green. The soft green color of spring. As you breathe in the soft greenness, the entire area of your chest relaxes more deeply than you've ever relaxed before. Green relates to the trait of Harmony, that central pillar of Balance corresponding to your chest and torso. Your body moves in harmony with your baby's descending path, and you go deeper into relaxation.

Green is also the color of Wisdom, the trait that incubates and nurtures creation before it is born. Just as the green fruit ripens and as the earth nurtures seeds and then gives forth life, so too your body has been helping your baby develop in good health, and, on your birthing day, will easily and naturally give forth a new beginning of life. Filled with this sense of balance and life-giving, your body is in perfect harmony with the energy of green and with your natural birthing instincts.

Your thoughts turn now to the color of yellow. Yellow also corresponds to the trait of Harmony, and the central line of your body including your

stomach. Imagine a yellow mist surrounding your stomach, and helping it to relax. Harmony means balance, and the yellow mist reminds you of the importance of balancing the physical and the spiritual as you carry and will raise your baby. Pregnancy, birth, and parenting are spiritual times, when a new soul is entrusted to you. The energy of yellow reminds you that you will balance this with your keen sense of physical well-being, to be sure you keep you and your baby's bodies healthy as well. You think of taking care of your baby with nurturing mercy, the womanly quality Harmony inclines toward, as you relax deeply, into the mist of yellow relaxation.

Now you turn your thoughts to the orange energy that corresponds to the trait known as Foundation. Foundation is the trait that represents the connection between heaven and earth, and usually corresponds to a man's organ. Through connecting with G-d's holy "brit", you have had the merit to house a physical and spiritual being inside you. Now, you feel the orange mist drifting in and around your lower abdomen, the area that houses your womb and your reproductive organs. The mist gently soothes your baby and creates a veil of tranquility that softly protects and nurtures the miracle of life that was sent down from heaven to join you in this world.

Imagine yourself now, on a strawberry colored mist that gently envelops your entire lower torso, taking away all tension, bathing you in gentle relaxation. Let the soft, strawberry mist of perfect relaxation drift throughout all your lower back, and spine. Think about how red is the color of humility, as you realize that you are a physical being, and lovingly submit to G-d's will by releasing all tension in your lower torso and back. Red is also awe and the color of physical life and fertility. And you think about the awesomeness of the intricate human body He created you with, and that He created inside you. The ability for one body to give rise to another is a miracle of this physical world.

To give life to another means you must emulate Hashem – just as He contracted Himself to make room for the birth of the world, so your uterus contracts to make space for your baby to easily move through the birth path. Red is Gevurah, and you are strong, as you breathe through each contraction, allowing your body to pull back and nudge the baby through. Finally, you feel the serene ecstasy of joy, an energy which also relates to the color red. joy, as new life emerges. Breathe in the red mist that gently wraps your body in a soft blanket of natural relaxation. And enjoy the deep relaxation in comfort.

And now, working from a perfect level of relaxation, see yourself surrounded by a marvelous mist of all the colors of the rainbow, combining all the colors of the powers of life, of G-d's traits, surrounding you with peace. Feel the confidence that you are developing day by day as you become aware of G-d's ever-presence, especially at this time when the gates of heaven are open for you. Embrace the knowledge that birthing is a natural process of your mind, body, and soul working together, in this generation when an easy birth is especially possible. Let the reflective glow of the colors of the rainbow permeate every part of your essence while you continue to grow in confidence and the belief that this will indeed be a comfortable, easy birth. Your natural birthing instinct tells you that you will bring your baby into the world in a peaceful, relaxed manner that mirrors nature.

Chana, in I Samuel, pleads for a child. The imagery here is powerful yearning for pregnancy and a child:

"Now Chana spoke in her heart" (*I Shemuel* 1:13). Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Yose ben Zimra: [She spoke] about matters of her heart. She said before Him: "Master of the universe, of everything that You created in a woman, nothing was created in vain. Eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a mouth to speak, hands to do work, feet to walk, breasts to nurse. These breasts that you placed over my heart – why should they not be used for nursing? Give me a son and I will nurse with them." (*Berakhot* 31b)

”כי אתה גחי מבטן מבטיחי על שדי אמי. עליך השלכתי מרחם מבטן אמי אלי אתה
(תהלים כב:י-יא)”

“For You are the One Who drew me forth from the womb, and made me secure on my mother's breasts. I was cast upon You from birth, from my mother's womb You have been my G-d.”

”שיר המעלות לדוד, ה” לא גבה לבי ולא רמו עיני ולא הלכתי בגדולות ובנפלאות ממני.
אם לא שויתי ודוממתי נפשי כגמול עלי אמו, כגמול עלי נפשי. יחל ישראל אל ה” מעתה
ועד עולם. (תהלים קלא)”

“A song of ascents, by David. Hashem, my heart was not proud, and my eyes were not haughty, nor did I pursue matters too great and too wondrous for me. I swear that I stilled and silenced my soul, like a suckling child at his mother’s side, like the suckling child is my soul. Let Israel hope to Hashem, from this time and forever.”

Additional Reading/Bibliography

Straight From the Heart by Tehilla Abramov - general information about nursing including some Torah ideas. An expert in the field told me the religious perspective is excellent but the medical information is a little outdated.

A Labor of Love by Rachel Broncher – general information about childbirth including some Torah ideas

Hand in Hand with Hashem by Nechama Epstein – a Jewish approach to childbirth

Aneini – special prayers for special occasions

Tefilas Chana HaShalem – special prayers for women

Roni Akara by Rabbi Yaakov Hillel – a book plus prayers for those trying to have children and who are expecting

It's All in Your Mind by Sara Yosef – how the power of the mind can affect reality

Hachana Ruchanit L'leida compiled by Dafna and Moshe Chasdai – essays on spirituality in childbirth (Hebrew, have not seen it sold in America)

Expecting Miracles compiled by Chana Weisberg – essays on pregnancy and childbirth by religious women

One Baby Step at a Time by compiled Chana Weisberg – essays on motherhood by religious women

Ashrei Yoladeto - A Guide to Pregnancy, Childbirth, and the Nursing Mother by Rabbi Yosef Yaffe - Jewish laws and practices as well as prayers to say during each of these stages