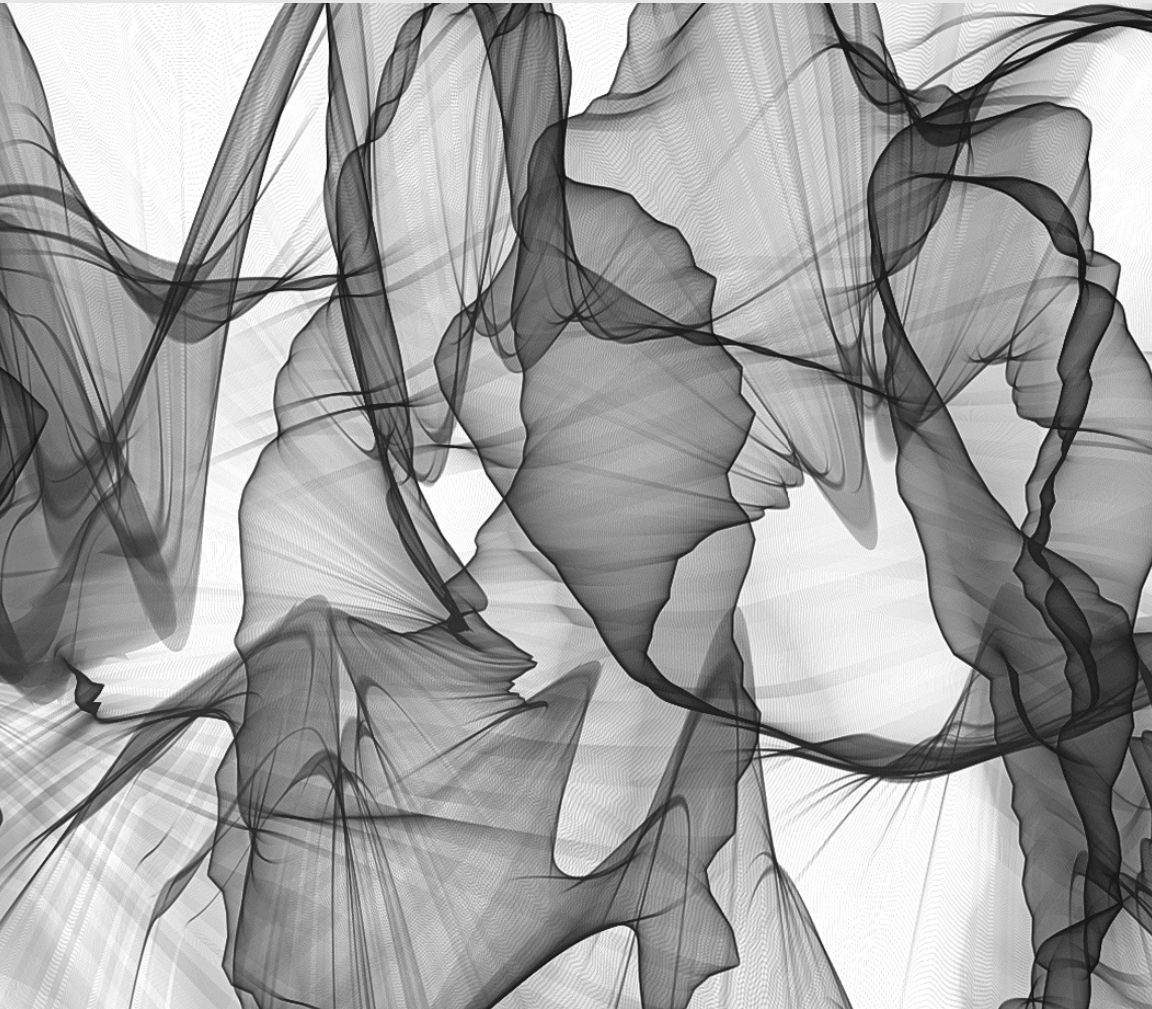


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Radical Reclamations: Reviving Jewish Birth Practices

This article uses autoethnography to explore a rabbi's difficult labour and birth experience and how it led her to research on Jewish birth practices. Religious and ethnic birth practices are often elided in patriarchal and Western culture, and the uncovering and reclaiming of such practices are an important site of empowerment for mothers and for women¹ whose knowledges have been suppressed. Through reclaiming birth practices, there is also a reclamation of traditional knowledge, bodily autonomy, women's community, and personal empowerment.

In using autoethnography, the author locates herself in the discursive formations of such reclamation and empowerment as well as engages in the Jewish cultural practice of dialogue with text and tradition, thus merging personal, professional, traditional, and transformative research, writing, and practice.

Introduction

*I am alone in the birthing room. It is cold, sterile, and different from the cozy home birth I had imagined. We are in a birth storm, and the midwife gets called away to a fast and imminent birth down the hall. I can hear the woman screaming. My husband left a while ago to get some food to keep his energy up, but it's the middle of the night, and nothing is open. The minutes tick on, and the pain is getting unbearable. I think back to my birth preparation to see what I can draw on for comfort and strength. All those pregnancy and birth books but nothing for this moment—nothing for when my screams meet the screams of the woman down the hall. I begin to despair. I begin to sing the familiar tune: *Kol ha'olam kulo, Gesher tzar me'od, Veba'ikar lo lifached k'lal* (The whole world, Is a very narrow bridge, The Important thing is not to be afraid).*

This article combines autoethnography with nontraditional forms of research to discuss the radical reclamations of Jewish birth practices. There is little

published material on Jewish rituals for birth, largely due to the patriarchal nature of the religion (Firestone). Women's traditions have been elided and subsumed, particularly because women's traditions and rituals were most alive during times in which most women were not afforded the tools of literacy. The result is that much knowledge around labour and birth have been buried. Thankfully, we are at a time of great reclamation and resistance to patriarchal Judaism. Jewish feminists have been working to uncover and revive Jewish women's practices (Grenn). When I gave birth for the first time, I was already an ordained rabbi and an academic. I was no stranger to research or to Jewish tradition and wisdom. In the difficult moments of labour, however, I realized I knew nothing about how my female ancestors approached and supported one another through birth. I began a journey of becoming a certified labour and birth doula specializing in Jewish spiritual birth practices so that others may experience the support of these radical reclamations in the face of patriarchal and male-dominated religion/culture and birth environments.

Why Autoethnography?

Autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis and Bochner 739). By cultural, I believe Ellis and Bochner mean the wider society, but in my circumstance, it has to do with my ethnic, religious, and cultural Jewishness. Culture is often considered in writing on autoethnography: "The intent of autoethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural and to make room for nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression" (Wall 146). In *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*, Robin M. Boylon and Mark P. Orbe consider how an individual's interaction with their culture, particularly minority cultures, brings together "self-reflexivity" and "intercultural inquiry" (15) and how autoethnography meets intersectionality when "socially stigmatized identities" are negotiated (22). This style of research is culturally appropriate from a Jewish perspective because so much of how Jewish culture and religion are transmitted is via storytelling (Buxbaum), and autoethnography draws on the features of good storytelling in order to evoke meaning in ways that transcend traditional academic writing (Bochner and Ellis).

I learned about Jewish birth practices through the stories passed on in women's communities, and I add my own stories here as a way of joining together the voices of women through the generations. In many cultures, birth stories are an important part of transmitting knowledge between women (Farley and Widmann). Perhaps it is unsurprising that one can find many autoethnographic accounts of pregnancy, pregnancy loss, birth, and new

motherhood (Sell-Smith and Lax; Lupu; Fraser; Kurz, Davis and Browne; Hull). Bringing together not only the reclaimed voices of women and birth but also the reclaimed traditions of Judaism is the purpose of this research. In each section, I share some of my own autoethnographical reflections and then pair these with autoethnographical research—research about autoethnography as methodology and autoethnographies as research and writing—and how these inform and help reclaim birth practices. My hope is that the bridging of personal narrative with this research and redeployment of radical knowledge will help to resist patriarchal religions and patriarchal medical systems, which work to elide Jewish birth practices.

Methodology

Although some of this research comes from books and articles, much of my knowledge comes from the teachings of Orthodox Jewish birthworkers who have learned via oral traditions the rituals and traditions discussed here. Therefore, the methodology of this article is nontraditional both in terms of being unable to cite original sources lost to oral tradition—a common problem faced by feminist scholars doing the work of reclaiming buried or hidden women’s knowledges (McGregor)—but also because feminist autoethnography, which centres the “I” in an attempt to reclaim and recover feminine selfhood, is itself not taken seriously in academic research (Etorre). In order to research Jewish birth practices I took a course with Chana Newman, an Orthodox Jewish doula and birth educator, who has access to community-based knowledge. I also took doula certification classes via Doula Canada. This, in addition to more common academic approaches to research, is how I came to the understandings of these reclaimed spiritual birth practices.

We Don’t Know What We Don’t Know

I became a doula, and specifically a doula specializing in Jewish birth, because of my own experiences in labour and delivery. I had planned for a home birth with my first child. We had a tub in our kitchen for a month. We had practiced breathing. We carefully planned lighting and music. We were pumped. And then my daughter refused to come out. We had to go to the hospital three times for the drug that induces labour. And then when I went into labour at the hospital, I had to stay. This change in birth plan and place threw me. And the intense contractions brought on by the drugs and the back labour didn’t help. I had one intervention and then another, finally ending in a caesarean. During that tough labour, I found myself googling “Jewish birth practices” and “spiritual birth.” I was desperate for anything to help me focus that was rooted in Judaism. As a Jew and a rabbi, so much of how I ground myself and connect with life’s most sacred moments is through Jewish culture and

ritual. But I realized in that moment that even as a Jewish leader and feminist, I didn't even know what I didn't know about how my ancestors gave birth. For a moment, I was angry at my teachers and rabbinic mentors, but they also had never been taught anything about Jewish labour and birth. I struggled while playing Jewish music I was pulling up on my phone between contractions. Luckily, my daughter is healthy and wonderful, and although it was a tough birth, the outcomes were good. Still, it took some healing to get over how she came into the world.

With my second child, I wanted to prepare differently. I knew labour and birth can go any which way, but I also knew that I needed to prepare myself mentally differently than I had the first time. For me, that meant going to my cultural roots. I am a humanistic Jewish rabbi, meaning I offer teaching, programming, and ritual around Jewish history and culture. Being Jewish is important to me. I wanted some Jewish connection in labour and birth. So I began researching Jewish birth rituals, blessings, practices, and stories. I got my hands on Jewish birth art and affirmations. You should have seen the bag I took to the birth centre or hospital—it was loaded with stuff. And then, of course, the birth went nothing like how I had imagined. This time, it was fast and furious. I went into labour at my daughter's second birthday party and didn't make it to the cake before I had to leave. I was concerned I'd give birth in the car on the way to the birth centre. Thankfully, all was well and I had a beautiful birth in a large and luxurious birthing tub, and my son came into the world healthy and happy. The bag full of the Jewish birth stuff? Still in the car.

Birth is a little addictive. I became really interested in it—how it's discussed, how it's treated in film and art, how it's seen in our society. And I remained interested in Jewish birth approaches and ritual. I decided that I wanted to offer women and birthing people support and guidance, with a Jewish inflection. That's how, in addition to being a professor, a rabbi, and a mother, I became a doula.

It is astonishing that so little is known about ethnic, religious, and cultural approaches to birth given that around half the population gives birth, and every human was once birthed in some way. It is a testament to the power of patriarchy that so much birth wisdom has been suppressed. It is a testament to the resistive power of women and minorities that sacred birth practices are still taught and practiced. There are three main reasons, I believe, that sacred and traditional birth practices are under threat: The medicalization of birth; patriarchy and colonial religion/culture; and the Western prioritization of the individual over the communal/collective. These three features of what bell hooks calls “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” coalesce to suppress ethnic, cultural, and religious birth knowledges. These features are why even I, a scholar and a rabbi, had no training or teaching about spiritual and sacred birth practices. These features are why when these practices are recovered and reclaimed; they offer such liberatory potential.

Penny Simkin, the well-known childbirth educator, says that a good labour experience relies on the three Rs: rhythm, relaxation, and ritual. This is my

experience as well. And it seems to me that some of that ritual can and should reflect the culture of the person in labour. Simkin refers to rituals that birthers come up with spontaneously, such as rocking, tapping an object, and stroking or brushing a body part in a rhythmic and ritualistic way. Ritual is a hugely powerful cultural and religious tool (Kuile). For many Jews, lighting Shabbat candles, saying blessings, or connecting with other birth rituals can be a source of great comfort, but most birthworkers have no training or experience in cultural competencies and culturally specific ritual knowledge related to birth (Noble et al.). In Jewish culture, as in other cultures, there are communities of women who hold and perpetuate such knowledge. In the case of Judaism, there is a long-standing tradition of having women birthworkers, like doulas, present at a birth. The reasons for this come from patriarchal and sexist laws within Judaism known as *Niddah*, or purity laws (Cristofar). According to these laws, a man cannot touch a woman who is bleeding (in menstruation or childbirth). While this is problematic from a feminist perspective, and Jewish feminists have challenged and debated the practices of *Niddah* (Avishai), these laws have created a need for women to support women in birth, which has, paradoxically and ironically, had a hugely positive impact on women's birth experiences. Because men could not support women in birth, there are large networks of women birthworkers who retain traditional knowledge. I learned from Chana Newman, one such Orthodox birthworker. In my own work, I wanted to bring some of the spiritual teachings for birth to Jews who were not necessarily so observant as to require a doula due to the *Niddah* laws but for whom Jewish spirituality and culture could still be empowering during birth.

Patriarchal Judaism has not upheld and sought to teach birth practices, but these networks of women and birthworkers have kept it alive. Once the medicalization of birth became widespread, doctors and nurses were not trained in this cultural knowledge, but these networks bring the spiritual and sacred knowledge into hospitals, birth centres, and homes. It is mobile and mobilized knowledge and has survived the centralized medical system's attempt to wrest control of birth away from traditionally female midwives. And finally even though Western culture is highly individualistic, often sacrificing the collective and communal in favour of the individual—taking women's communities around birth and mothering and dividing us into nuclear family units—these sacred knowledges and communities around birth persist. It's a remarkable resistance that despite all of the factors that have caused the suppression of birth knowledges and networks, these sacred practices survive and, in some communities, thrive. To reclaim birth traditions is truly radical. These traditions have a decolonizing and feminist ethic at their core; they reify women's knowledge and religious/cultural practice and bring them to bear in one of life's most sacred moments.

The Body, the Community, and the Sacred

I am part of a network called Imeinu Doulas. The word “imeinu” means “our mothers.” After my difficult birth experience, it has felt so empowering to learn about and then team up with an international group of women who are bringing Jewish spiritual practices into birthing spaces all over the world. I am taking classes from the Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute, where they prioritize uncovering women’s hidden histories and rituals. These have to do with reclaiming connection with our bodies, our earth, and one another. It is such a powerful and different approach from the kind of Jewish practice I have always experienced, even in fairly feminist Jewish circles.

*Some of my practice now involves monthly New Moon rituals and circles. Jewishly, women get together at the new moon. Organizations like At the Well are helping women connect with one another to offer ritual and sharing circles, reclaiming this ancient practice. I am studying the birth art of feminist, Jewish artist Judy Chicago (DeBiaso). I learn about how the image of the “Tree of Life,” a central Jewish metaphor for the Torah, is also imprinted on the placenta, which has its own “tree of life” design. I learn about the psalms that are traditionally said at a birth. I learn about women’s prayers, tachines—written in Yiddish because that was the language Eastern European Jewish women spoke, without access to Hebrew, the language of scholarship and traditional prayer (Tarnor). These prayers are about labour, birth, and safeguarding women and babies. I revisit Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent*, noting the skillful hands of the midwife and the rhythmic refrain she uses. Through this knowledge, I help heal from my own births. I also help heal the ancestral amnesia. I will help bring these teachings to others. I will help revive and reclaim them. I will help resist the severing of women from our traditions, from one another.*

It is so powerful to be part of a network of doulas who are reviving these traditions. Doulas are birthworkers who support the physical, emotional, and informational needs of the birther. I add spiritual needs to that complement. Being a doula is in itself a resistance to Western and patriarchal models of birth (Abramson et al; Mahoney and Mitchell; Krapf). That, combined with the Jewish reclamations, feels like such an exciting challenge to the traditional birth world and the traditional Jewish world.

I learn about the tachines, women’s prayers uneducated women had to write on their own because nothing in the traditional prayer book reflected their experience or served during this moment: “I pray unto You, Lord, God of Israel, that you consider my prayer as You did that of Mother Channo, the prophetess who prayed for a son” (Tarnor 16). The biblical story of “Channo,” (usually translated as “Hannah”) from the biblical Book of Samuel is understood by these women as a proof for the efficacy of prayer in pregnancy. How exciting to have access to these insights about what women, excluded from houses of study, would have had about the texts that I write about today.

There are many women-created understandings/interpretations, midrash in the Jewish tradition, that extend original biblical stories, making them anew for each age (Weisberg, *The Crown*). I explore the “customs and folklore of Jewish birth” (Klein). I learn about Judy Chicago’s birth art (DeBiaso) and the birth art of so many others. With my clients, I encourage them to use such an image as a focal point during labour. Together, these images connect Jewish women through the generations.

There are many beautiful and inspiring Jewish labour and birth practices, such as reciting Psalm 121, the Song of Ascents (Nadav). Jewish professionals and authors have connected Jewish teachings with traditional childbirth education (Finkelstein and Finkelstein; Weisberg, *Expecting Miracles*). But the most profound learning I do is with doula and childbirth educator Chana Newman. She teaches me Jewish birth meditations and visualizations, Torah and Talmud teachings about birth, and the segulot, a protective ritual that Chasidic Jewish women often practice. This is a radical reclamation for me of knowledge that, as a secular Jewish woman, I have never learned. This is how women’s knowledge has always been shared—woman to woman as well as context- and culture-specific—across time and distance. It is so different to the traditional academic learning I have done. Although it is so important to honour knowledge and teachers and cite sources, some of these many teachings have no citable original source. This is women’s wisdom passed down through community.

Judaism prides itself on being a book-learning culture. I have read and written many commentaries on traditional text. When Chana Newman teaches me to see the Book of Exodus anew, it is nothing short of revelation. The Exodus story, a cornerstone in Jewish culture, is of how the Israelites fled Egypt as slaves and found freedom in the promised land. Newman taught me to see the story as a birth narrative. It begins with the midwives, Shifrah and Puah, who defy the Pharaoh’s order to kill Israelite sons. It ends with the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, a watery passageway that “delivers” the people to freedom. Just as the Book of Exodus is the story of the birth of our nation, women literally birth the nation every time we bring a new Jewish child into our community. Considering text anew in this way opened my heart and mind to a new dimension of Jewish study and story.

Newman also taught me such a lovely practice of women in labour reciting the Misheberach, the prayer for healing, but directing it outwardly to others who are sick or suffering. In this moment of distress and pain, she channels her focus to the healing of others, reminding herself of our interconnectedness. In the Misheberach, it is traditional to call in the person you are offering wishes of healing to according to their maternal line. We say the name of the person in need of healing, and add name, “daughter/son of” and their mother’s name. We are reminded that it is traditionally and still so often mothers who

care for the sick and who care most about the sick. How beautiful that as a woman is on the verge of becoming mother, she can unite with the mothers before and around her in this way.

Empowered by this traditional wisdom as part of my doula journey, I myself now offer workshops and trainings on spiritual birth practices in an attempt to widen the net of those who can access these teachings. I offer some of these teachings here as a way to continue to share this cultural knowledge and because I believe it is important for people of all cultures to find the practices that resonate with them. It is my hope that these are useful in themselves and that they inspire research on different birth traditions across many cultures as we work together to resist patriarchal and imperialist birth. In that vein, here are my top five things to do for a spiritual birth.²

1. Find a spiritual focal point. For me, it was birth art by the Jewish feminist artist Judy Chicago. It let me concentrate on something outside myself and connected me with my tradition and the many women in my culture who have come before me.
2. Create a sheet of blessings, prayers, and affirmations that are spiritually significant to you. Part of what I offer my clients is sources for these blessings and affirmations, but you can collect these yourself as well. Have your partner/birthing coach practice saying some of them so that they can offer these to you when needed. You may wish to create signs or posters of some of them to hang up in the birthing room/space
3. Find a song from your culture that is meaningful. I used “The Whole World is a Narrow Bridge,” or in Hebrew, “Kol Ha’olam Kulo Gesher Tsar Me’od.” Have this easily accessible on your phone and the phone of your partner/birth coach. Perhaps create a playlist of several such songs.
4. Practice visualizations in pregnancy you can use in labour. They may have to do with the cultural values you hope to instil, for example prayer for healing. There is a Jewish midrash (story) that babies learn the Torah in the womb. Create a visualization around this or any other image.
5. Create ceremony for the transition to parent (for example we Jews use mikvah/ritual bath) and/or baby welcoming (for example Brit Milah/ Brit Shalom/ baby naming)

Concluding Thoughts: Endings and Beginnings

After that challenging first birth, I saw a flyer for something called “Birth Fire.” Three doulas in my neighbourhood were hosting a bonfire in a local park where we were invited to write and burn our painful birth stories. I attended, leaving my five-week-old daughter at home for the first time. Hearing others share about their difficult and painful births was hard but healing. We were in it together. I wrote my story, and I threw it in the fire. Release. In the Hebrew Bible, when people make

sacrifices at the Temple, some are called burnt offerings. Distinctions are made between those that get burned and those that get burnt up. The immolation renders something into nothing. While my labour and birth experiences are always with me, in offering my words to the fire, I was able to let go of some of the pain of it, making more space for settling into my new role as mother. Connecting with others in the birthing world, the Jewish community of birthworkers especially, helps ground me as I unite these many parts of myself: scholar, doula, Jew, rabbi, teacher, and mother. For many mothers, labour's end marks a new life, a new beginning. As each new life joins the tapestry of connection, community, and culture, we forge newness and continuity together, again and again. I will not birth again, but I can help enrich the birth experiences of those who come next, using the wisdom of those who came before. This is a most radical reclamation and resistance to the forces that seek to divide and hide our connections and our practices. Jewishly we say, and to the women who have given and will give birth, I say: l' dor v' dor, from generation to generation.

Endnotes

1. There are many people who give birth who do not identify as women. It was impossible to know how many nonbinary and trans people gave birth and what their experiences were like until very recently. The knowledge I share here comes from traditional women's communities within Judaism. There have certainly been people who would not have wished to be identified as women who were part of those circles. My hope is that today we can discuss women's communities with that understanding—that is, recognizing the importance of uplifting the voices of women while being mindful not to erase the voices of those who do not identify as women.
2. For example, I explain these in a video on the “Jewish Mommy Life YouTube channel”: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_desbyK_ME.

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