

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Birth and New Ritual



Context

How are Reform Jewish values expressed in practical situations? One way is through the creation of new lifecycle rituals – responsive to our needs, grounded in Jewish texts. Our experience of birth is an example. In a future “In 1000 Words” we will explore the meaning and challenges of milah. But what of the moment of birth itself? And how do we respond to birth without being restricted by gender?

In this article, with a very different feel and content to other essays in this series, Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner, Senior Rabbi to Reform Judaism, brings together Rabbis Sylvia Rothschild and Esther Hugenholtz to share creative rituals from their lives, filling in some of the gaps that tradition left open.

Content

Judaism has wrapped key lifecycle moments from the very moment of birth until death in rituals and prayers that express Jewish values, and transform the meaning and experiences of these critical moments. Jewish rituals around death have been far more developed, and also far more egalitarian, than those around birth. Reform Judaism has redressed this historic sexism by creating and developing new rituals and liturgy around birth itself and naming.

The most important difference between Reform birth and traditional naming rituals and prayers emanates from our core value of egalitarianism, our equal valuing of our children, whatever gender they have been assigned at birth. Boys and girls are welcomed wholeheartedly in the same way, apart from male circumcision which is now accompanied by egalitarian liturgy that complements conventional liturgy. This is one of the clearest ways that Reform Jews concretize our values in our Judaism. Birth and naming rituals are imbued with hope, it is an act of hope to bring a new child into the world and to hope that we will be parents deserving of our children. Here are just a very few of the simplest rituals that two Rabbis - Esther Hugenholtz and Sylvia Rothschild have created. There is now a wealth of rituals and prayers to access. Please keep on creating!

Welcoming into the World - the moment of birth

Throughout the ages, the experience of childbirth has balanced on the cusp of life and death, blessing and curse. The following are straightforward but emotionally powerful ways of marking births, representing the strength of Reform Judaism to bring poignant, effective, simple rituals that transform moments and bring into them *kedushah* - sanctity.

What has been missing from the Jewish tradition is a response to an *empowered* birth experience. *Halakhah* (Jewish law) and folk customs have crafted numerous blessings, prayers and rituals honouring pregnancy as well as focussing on the suffering of labour but very little about the conscious moment of birth itself. The 16th century compilation of halakhah, the *Shulchan Aruch*ⁱ codifies that the blessing ‘*hatov v’hameitiv*’ (‘Who is good and does good’) is recited after the birth of a boy and the ‘*Shehecheyanu*’ (thanking God for enabling us to reach this time) is recited after the birth of a girl. This gender disparity is problematic for us with our core principal of egalitarianism. Furthermore, the blessing provides words but no ritual framework.

Inspired by an Islamic custom to recite the ‘*Adhan*’ (call to prayer affirming the oneness of God) in the newborn’s ear, Rabbi Esther Hugenholtz crafted her own simple birth ritual – irrespective of gender. When her son was born and immediately placed in her arms, she whispered ‘*baruch haba beshem Adonai*’ (‘blessed is the one who comes in the Name of the Eternal’ⁱⁱ) and the *Shema* in his ear. To welcome him so freshly in the world with sacred Hebrew language celebrated her active role in the birthing process as well as his intrinsic covenantal value as a human being and as a Jew.

The *niggun* (wordless melody)

As each child was born to Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild, she whispered their given names to them. Looking into the calm and interested face looking back at her, and repeating the name of this new soul, it was a short step towards singing their name in a tune suggested by the rhythm of their names. Within a short period of time for each child a tune had emerged, wordless except for the power of the name behind it, and this tune became the song they heard regularly, used for welcome and for reassurance, for comfort and for recognition. It became the tune that accompanied them through childhood. Without even trying, a new *niggun* came into being, holding within it both the essence of the names the child was given and the hopes and aspirations Rabbi Rothschild and her partner held for them for the future.

Welcoming liturgy for the birth room

One of the things Rabbi Rothschild missed after the drama of the birth was over was a form of words to use to give thanks for the safe arrival of her child and a form of words beyond “welcome to the world” and a potted history of who the closest relatives were who would be coming to see them shortly. So she wrote a short liturgy, comprising some biblical verses and some later blessings:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” Indeed children are a heritage of the Eternal; the fruit of the womb is a reward. From the mouths of babes and sucklings we have found strength. What is human life that You are mindful of us, human beings that You think of us? Yet You have made us but little lower than the angels and crowned us with glory and honour. I love that God heard my voice and my supplications, listened to me when I laboured. I feared for myself and my child and God has delivered us. Return my soul to your rest, for God has dealt well with me. I shall walk with God in the lands of the living, and shall teach my child to know You. I gratefully thank You, O living and eternal God, for You have returned my soul within me with compassion, your faithfulness to me is great.

(With hands on the child), “Be a blessing. Walk in the ways of God and be whole hearted. May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh / Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel.

Baruch ata Adonai eloheinu melech ha’olam hatov v’hameitiv

Blessed are you Eternal our God, sovereign of the universe, who is good and who does good.

Baruch ata Adonai eloheinu melech ha’olam, she’hechayanu, vekey’manu ve’higyanu lazman hazeh
Blessed are You Eternal our God, sovereign of the universe, who has kept us alive and supported us and brought us to this time.”

The candlestick for Shabbat

Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild also describes how on the first Shabbat following the birth of each child, her family added a new candlestick to the Shabbat table, one of a pair whose partner would be given to the child when they reached bar/bat mitzvah. Her family had the idea that, upon leaving home they would take them with them, and set up their own Shabbat table with a Jewish object that had been with them since their earliest days. In the meantime their Shabbat light has grown with each child, and when they are away for a brief period their candlestick remains in the family home as a presence at the table.

Contemplation

Celebrating the birth of a child with a community is an important step which will often happen some months after birth. More difficult to plan for are the unpredictable, private moments, like the first time one holds one’s child. In this article, we hear how some Reform rabbis brought new ritual, grounded in their Judaism, into their parenting, something which Reform Judaism encourages all of us to do.

Planning is a key part of parenting. Perhaps while we are packing a hospital bag we also need to give time over to packing our ritual moments too?

ⁱ Orach Chayim 223:1

ⁱⁱ Psalm 118:26