

Women to Know



AGE: 59
OCCUPATION: Doula, doula instructor, author
LIVES IN: Jerusalem
NUMBER OF CHILDREN: 6
INTERESTS: Birth

THIS WEEK WITH

Sarah Goldstein

As a doula, nursing student, and future midwife, birth is a topic that really excites me. So you can imagine how gratifying it was to interview Sarah Goldstein, Israel's premier doula, doula instructor, and the author of three books, who has attended over 1,500 births.

Born in Philadelphia to a non-observant family, Sarah received a degree in social work and hoped to complete a master's. When her studies were delayed for a year, she was invited to a Chabad house, and in a short time she was a new *baalas teshuvah* headed to Tzefas.

In Israel, Sarah met and married her husband, a South African, and began raising her family. They moved to Jerusalem, and when her oldest was 13, Sarah saw an ad in the newspaper seeking women interested in becoming doulas—professionals who provide support and resources to expectant families before, during and after birth. Recalling a friend who had helped her during her own births, she thought, "I want to do this."

Sarah enrolled in her first training, followed

by another training in the US, and began attending births. She loved the work so much that she eventually flew to San Francisco to train as a doula instructor in order to teach other *frum* women to be doulas.

A doula, Sarah says, can make all the difference for a woman in labor. When a woman feels safe and supported, she is more confident in her ability to handle the experience. "I try to help women tap into resources and strength they didn't even know they had," she explains.

In addition to assisting women who want to give birth naturally, doulas also have much to offer mothers who plan to receive medication during labor or who must have a C-section. They offer support and advocacy to ensure that the woman's birth ideal is respected by the medical staff. In Sarah's view, however, there is much to be said for the transformative power of giving birth without medication, not to mention that a natural birth prevents many complications that may arise from interventions.

"I'll never forget one woman who had an epidural with her first two births," Sarah says. "Her mother had told her she would need

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—Sarah Goldstein

one for her third as well. I said, 'What if I do things to help so that maybe you won't need one?'" With Sarah's help the woman was able to give birth naturally. "Afterward, she called her mother and said, 'It was hard, but I did it!' It was wonderful to see her excitement."

Hoping to give confidence to expectant mothers, Sarah compiled a series of positive Jewish birth stories in two books, *Special Delivery* and *More Special Deliveries*. One of her favorites is about a woman who gave birth in a car on the Brooklyn Bridge, with the help of an obstetrician who "just happened" to be in the car in front of her. She also partnered with Rebbetzin Yitty Neustadt to put out two CDs, *Growth through Childbirth* and *Balancing Hishtadlus and Bitachon During Pregnancy*, which include *hashkafah* and sources from *Tanach*. In addition, she founded 15 lending libraries of books on pregnancy and childbirth. "I see a void," she says, "and I just have to try and fill it."

Sarah acknowledges that it wasn't easy to do this work while raising six children, particularly when she had to drop everything and rush to a birth. Her husband picked up the slack when she was gone. "No doula can do it without the support of her husband. It's happened on occasion that I didn't have Shabbos prepared by Thursday—and there he was in the kitchen, cooking Shabbos. Thank G-d he knew how to cook!"

At times, however, she considered quitting. "I once went to births three *Shabbosim* in a row," she recalls. "I was fed up with leaving my family and my guests."

She also faced some opposition from hospital midwives, who are primary caregivers; doulas, by contrast, are non-medical support professionals. "I know a lot of

midwives really love to do some of what we do, and they have a deeper connection with the mother. But they never meet her before the birth. They're usually assigned to two or three rooms at once, and when their shifts end, they leave. I think there's sometimes a little bit of jealousy and resentment. Midwives have said to me, 'You're with the mother for an hour and you get paid.'"

To bridge the gap, Sarah spoke at a course for midwives, explaining that doulas do more than an hour of work; they have prenatal meetings and postpartum visits, spend hours at home with the mother, and have to turn their schedules upside down at a moment's notice. "It's a much bigger sacrifice than they realize."

Part of Sarah's goal is to dispel preconceptions about birth that may prevent families from fully experiencing this life-changing event. "I want to take the fear out of birth. It should be a challenging but positive experience when a couple is becoming a family."

Sarah believes that while there is *ruchniyus* in every type of birth, natural or Caesarean, medicated or non-medicated, women should be educated about their options so they can look back on the birth as a formative experience. She described a documentary filmed in an old-age home, where one woman spoke in detail about the birth of one of her children 60 years earlier. "It's a memory a woman never forgets," Sarah says.

There's one thing in particular that Sarah believes every mother should know: "It's a privilege and a responsibility to carry and give birth to a *Yiddishe nesbamah*, and that entails learning whatever she can learn to make it a healthy pregnancy and a safer birth... We want to make each birth safe and special." ■

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