

Chava Dumas



Doulas on Duty

An ancient calling
comes full circle

Shifrah and Puah moved expeditiously, completely in sync with one another, as they offered their loving care and expert medical know-how to the women who depended on them. Outside, they were surrounded by threatening adversity; inside there was light and joy. Defying Pharaoh's murderous decree, the two midwives continued their work, undaunted.

The Jewish women had responded in those tense times by encouraging their discouraged husbands to trust in the vision of the coming redemption, a future that the women believed with *emunah sheleimah* would indeed occur as Hashem had promised.

Pharaoh was enraged with the midwives. "How dare you defy my orders!"

"The Hebrew women give birth too rapidly, before we even arrive," they answered firmly.

Shifrah and Puah assisted the Hebrew women and their newborns: comforting, nurturing throughout the birth process, fully understanding their vital role.

“...And every Jewish woman [who helps] is a link in this golden chain, part of a long tradition of women helping women to become the mothers of our People.”

“*Maasei Avos siman labanim*,” the deeds of our forefathers are a sign for us, their children. The heroic inner strength of every Jewish woman who has ever given birth to a child during the bitterest moments of our People’s long exile has its roots in the bold optimism of our ancestors. This fortitude has been handed down throughout the generations.

Over eighteen years ago, when I was expecting my first child, I saw an advertisement for a monthly lecture series “Traditions in Childbirth,” at the Israel Center in downtown Jerusalem. The organizer and primary was Sarah Feld.

“Every new life that comes to the world is helping the *geulah* come closer...” I remember her words vividly.

“...And every Jewish woman is a link in this golden chain, part of a long tradition of women helping women to become the mothers of our People.

“We learn in the Torah that our ancestors gave birth swiftly and speedily with the midwives Yocheved and Miriam, who were Shifrah and Puah.”

Back then, Sarah was one of the few doulas in Israel. Uplifted by the births of her own children, Sarah started to accompany women giving birth, serving as a private cheering squad, when she saw that her presence helped them cope better.

Around the same time, an unassuming young woman named Leah Marinelli moved to Israel with her

family. Knowledgeable and enthusiastic to help, she was stunned by the ignorance of the benefits of doulas and what she deemed a “lack of labor coaches” on the Jerusalem scene. Quietly making inquiries, she discovered a qualified nurse-midwife named Aliza (Edery) Levine and convinced her to start doula-training workshops.

Only a small group participated in Aliza’s original training seminar, Israel Maternity Association (IMA), but without fanfare, a modest movement was born. Eventually, Misgav Ladach, one of the original Jerusalem hospitals which specialized in obstetrics, began training programs under the guidance of long-time childbirth educator Shoshana Goldbaum. As more women

benefited from having a knowledgeable person with them, the demand for labor coaches increased. Today, doula certification programs are offered in Hebrew as well as English, all over Israel. Leah Marinelli made an enormous impact before her return to America, where she is now living in Monsey with her own homebirth practice.

I had the opportunity to speak to two modern-day models who embody the ideals of Shifrah and Puah: Sarah Feld and Sarah Goldstein. Sarah Feld has watched the movement grow from its inception. In addition to being a labor coach and writer, she has been an Israel Childbirth Education Center certified childbirth preparation instructor for many years.

Sarah Goldstein, who entered the field nearly ten years ago, is herself now a teacher for one of the certification programs with a branch in Israel, Doulas of North America (DONA). She works as an advocate for natural childbirth, promoting safer, better-educated birth experiences, organizing and speaking at seminars and workshops in Israel and abroad, distributing tapes, and writing.

"It's all about information and having options," Sarah Goldstein begins, when the three of us are seated together in the living room of her home. I am intrigued by how both Sarahs exude a similar exuberance, a dedication to "the cause," though they differ in personality and approach. Every doula has her own style.

"Here's one of the most potentially life-changing events in a woman's life, not only the birth of her baby, but her beginning as a Jewish mother, and a doula is there to help make that transition as positive as possible," Sarah Goldstein says.

"We want women to be informed," adds Sarah Feld. "By offering books, classes, and one-on-one conversations, a woman will be better prepared to approach her upcoming life-changing experience with an optimistic outlook."



"It's also about creating a safe atmosphere by supporting the mother's need for privacy, for quiet, for freedom of movement, that all contribute to her sense of security."

Sarah G. notes, "A lot of women feel that this experience has been taken out of their hands, that they have no say in what goes on. And we also have to deal with the quick-fix, pop-a-pill, 'microwave generation' mentality."

Sarah F. points out, "Hashem created us so magnificently. It is an amazing opportunity to appreciate the significance of the miracles involved. Most women don't have any idea or any way to realize how much inner strength they actually possess. No one would jump into a car and start driving without learning basic driving skills or safety rules of the road, or go somewhere without directions or a map. The insights and knowledge a woman gathers in advance can put her in touch with the resources within herself. She will need them throughout a life of motherhood. It's not just about the birth... it's everything we learn beforehand, during and after that are lessons for a lifetime."

Sarah Goldstein adds, "There are excellent books to recommend for expectant women to read. *Baruch Hashem*, the selection keeps multiplying."

The phone rings. "Excuse me, I have to get this," Sarah G. says apologetically. Then Sarah F.'s cell phone rings. Doulas are always on call; I know our time may be very limited.

While both women are talking to clients who are wondering if they should head to the hospital, I scan some of the childbirth books on the shelves near the kitchen. Returning to our discussion, Sarah G. continues, "I started lending libraries in nine different religious neighborhoods in order to make these resources available so people can educate themselves.

"Then I started getting requests from women on bed-rest, for more reading material, something light and inspiring, like birth stories. I ordered a couple of books from the States. I realized that these weren't appropriate for our community. Then one day, a light bulb switched on in my head.

“It was easy enough to start collecting stories from all the women I have met. That’s how my book was born. Then, after it was published, I was flooded with responses from around the world, from women who were negatively affected by all the high-tech, major invasiveness that occurred at their birth. They were upset and traumatized. I realized that women needed sound medical information in the next book.

“It’s not just books. I spoke at great length with Rebbetzin Yitti Neustadt about the situation. I was busy going to midwifery and doula conferences in Europe and America, and I wanted women here to know what I was hearing. Women need *chizuk*, encouragement. I brought a tape recorder to Rebbetzin Neustadt, and she agreed to record two wonderful cassettes for us to distribute — beautiful, good, grounded Jewish *hashkafah*: *Growth Through Childbirth* and *Balancing Hishtadlus and Bitachon*. I make copies, mail them out, and the proceeds go towards the purchase of new books for the lending libraries. I’ve heard over and over how much these tapes help change women’s perspective and give them a better attitude.”

“One of our jobs as birth advocates,” Sarah F. interjects, “is to help women know what’s going on. Birth doesn’t have to involve unnecessary medical interventions inflicted upon unsuspecting people. Women need to know the ‘jargon,’ what the reasons are for many routine practices in pregnancy and birth.”

Sarah G. agrees. “Women need to know that they can question what is happening: why are ultrasounds ordered every month; why are inductions routine by a certain point; do we really need these drugs and drips? We need to know the statistics on the safety of what is being offered and how that may affect our health and that of our children. We need to learn to make wiser choices. We need



We learn from Chazal that the gates of Shamayim open as Hashem accompanies a new soul from the Olam Haneshamos into this tiny physical body which we are being entrusted with caring for.

to know what responsible *hishtadlus* we can do to help make our babies’ development and births safer and healthier.

“It’s also about creating a safe atmosphere,” adds Sarah F., “by supporting the mother’s need for privacy, for quiet, for freedom of movement, that all contribute to her sense of security.

“Every woman has different needs that she wants to know will be respected.

“As doulas, we bring our knowledge, years of experience and all that we have learned — *chachmas nashim bansah beisah* — that we can offer the person we are presently with. This can make a world of difference.”

Sarah G. explains, “One of the ways that has statistically been shown to help effectively reduce pain in childbirth, as well as lessen the use of medication, interventions and c-sections, is to bring along a doula. Research shows this can really make the entire experience more emotionally satisfying and positive. That’s why the goal of DONA is ‘A doula for every woman who wants one.’

“It’s also about encouraging caregivers to become more aware of alternative techniques.

“We are all part of the same team, rooting for the well-being of the women, but often the reality is that a midwife must juggle three or four women at the same time, as well as needing to be on top of the technical aspects of the birth. Plus, when her shift ends, the midwife goes home, to be replaced by another. Doulas offer a continual presence, an ongoing support system.

“We begin a relationship with the woman during her pregnancy, and accompany her to the hospital as a familiar, trusted friend. Afterwards, we help her establish the nursing bond with her baby, and follow up with a post-partum visit and phone calls to see how she’s adjusting. It’s not just new mothers who bring doulas. Every woman can benefit from bringing along

someone who will enhance the experience, whether it's her first or tenth."

Sarah F. chimes in, "We would like to see women taking better care of themselves during the prenatal period — learning proper nutrition and preparing themselves with invaluable stretching and aerobic exercises.

"At the birth, we offer massage, visualization, and music; we also make sure the woman stays hydrated, rests, and relaxes as much as she is able. We remind her that she can try various options such as walking around, stretching, or getting some fresh air. Everyone is unique, and we follow cues as well as make suggestions. Sometimes the woman just needs her own quiet space, and we step back, available at her request.

"Throughout our lives, we need Hashem. Childbirth and motherhood really bring this home to us. The time following the birth of a baby can be a period of very intense *deveikus* with Hashem. Many find it to be a special time for whole, heartfelt *davening*. We learn from *Chazal* that the gates of *Shamayim* open as Hashem accompanies a new soul from the *Olam Haneshamos* into this tiny physical body which we are being entrusted with caring for.



"Throughout our lives, we need Hashem. Childbirth and motherhood really bring this home to us.

"There are many studies today validating that a positive birth experience can significantly affect a woman's bonding with her baby, which contributes to more satisfying mothering, thus developing stronger relationships and building a healthier family structure. A woman who discovers her own inner strength and intuition, and her personal connection with Hashem, will utilize these gains throughout the challenges of her child-rearing career."

Sarah G.: "A doula is there to remind the woman of what she has learned and knows. The pain is *normal* — it's not dangerous. It's a labor of love with a prize. *L'fum tza'ra agra* — the reward is according to the toil." Our efforts in this area are surely worth it, and Hashem will hopefully reward us."

While we are talking, the phones ring again. I overhear each Sarah speaking.

"You feel ready to be leaving soon? Yes, I am all set to meet you. I'll be there."

"What, already? Great! You want me to come now? I'm on my way!"

Arranging this meeting with two doulas was rather complicated. I am grateful that we had this short period together before both Sarahs needed to rush off on their missions to assist Jewish women in the holy task of greeting the new generation. **B**

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