

“Birth is such a beautiful thing,” as many people say. The truth is, birth is an absolute miracle, but is it beautiful? It’s a lot messier than movies and TV shows portray. If your only source of knowledge on the labor and delivery process comes from mass media, you probably have a skewed view of how a baby comes into the world. Yes, most of us understand that labor and delivery is painful, but how many know that women have to birth their placenta after birthing their baby? How many know that many women tear and need stitches? I’ve been fascinated by labor and delivery since I was a little girl, but not until I was a sophomore in high school did I start to really understand what happens when a woman gives birth.

Like I said, the birthing process is a miracle. The way a woman's body knows exactly what it needs to do to bring a new life into the world is astonishing. Labor is a unique experience for every woman. For some, labor merely lasts a few hours, while it can last a few days for others. There are three stages of labor, the first of which is divided into two phases: early labor and active labor. During early labor, the uterus contracts irregularly and as this happens, the cervix begins to dilate and efface (to shorten and thin). Once the cervix dilates to around six centimeters, and contractions become more regular and intense, active labor begins. Often, a woman’s water breaks during active labor, and when it doesn’t do so on its own, a healthcare provider will break it. Typically, once a woman is in active labor her cervix will dilate one centimeter every hour, but some dilate more quickly and others at a slower rate. The final

phase of active labor is referred to as transition and is often very intense. Once the laboring mom has reached ten centimeters, it’s time to push that baby out! [1].

During the second stage of labor, a woman gives birth to her baby. Pushing a baby out can take just a few minutes or a few hours. When it’s time to push, she will either push in time with her contractions, when the doctor or nurses tell her to, or when she feels the urge to push [1]. This painful and intense stage of labor ends emotionally with mom and baby meeting for the first time.

The third and final stage of labor is when the mother births the placenta. The uterus continues to contract after delivering the baby, albeit a lot less painfully. Usually the placenta is birthed within thirty minutes, but it can take up to an hour. The contractions move the placenta into the birth canal, the woman gives a small push, and the placenta is out. Once the placenta has been delivered, the healthcare provider determines if any stitches are needed, and the uterus continues to contract in order to return to its normal size [1].

While the woman’s body is made to do all this, this process can be scary, and complications may arise. Because of this, most women give birth surrounded by nurses and other medical professionals; this has been the case for a very long time. The Torah mentions that we had midwives in Mitzrayim. As Bnei Yisrael multiplied and Pharaoh became increasingly scared of them, he called to him two Jewish midwives, Shifra and Puah. He instructed them to kill all the Jewish baby boys, but

they did not adhere to his command. Instead, they lied and told him the Jewish women were not like Mitzri women; they gave birth on their own before the midwives arrived [2].

So, who were the midwives who had enough courage to lie to Pharaoh and put their own lives at risk? According to Rashi, Shifra was none other than Moshe Rabbeinu's mother, Yocheved, and Puah, who was his sister, Miriam [3]. Their fear of G-d was greater than their fear of Pharaoh and Hashem, "made for them houses" as a reward [4]. Chazal commented on this and noted that Hashem gave them batei kehuna, levia, and malchut. Through this statement, Rashi was able to identify who Shifra and Puah were. The kehuna and levia were given to Yocheved through Moshe, and Aharon, and malchut was given to Miriam, who married into shevet Yehuda [5]. There's a rule in the Torah that every word used has a purpose, so what was the purpose of calling Yocheved and Miriam by the names Shifra and Puah? Different mefarshim have explained that the names were indicative of their roles as midwives. According to Rashi, the name Shifra reflected Yocheved's actions in beautifying the babies, *al shem shemeshaperet et havlad*, and the name Puah suggested that Miriam would soothe the newborn babies to stop their crying [3]. The Ba'al Haturim had a different view on the meaning of the name Shifra. He believed Shifra was derived from the word *shefoferet*, which means tube. When a mother delivered a baby in respiratory distress, Yocheved took a hollow reed, inserted it into the trachea, and blew air into the baby's lungs, thereby resuscitating the infant [6]. It's clear that

having a midwife present during labor was a necessity. Now, we have doctors and nurses as well, but the sentiment is the same: having a professional present during labor and delivery, whether for emotional support or medical assistance, makes all the difference in the world.

Unmedicated labor and delivery can be a particularly painful experience, but it wasn't always like this. Before Adam and Chava ate from the eitz hadaat, bringing a child into the world was not such an arduous task. They were not meant to eat from the eitz hadaat, in fact, that was the one thing they were commanded not to do, so Hashem punished them. Chava's punishment was mentioned in Sefer Bereishit, "*harbe arbe itzvonech v'heronech b'etzev teldi vanim...*", "I will greatly expand your hard labor and your pregnancies; in hardship shall you bear children" [7]. Many mefarshim commented on the word *etzev*. Some noted that Hashem punished Chava by making labor and delivery (and really all of pregnancy) a difficult and painful process. While it's true that unmedicated labor is agonizing and only became so after Chava sinned, it is possible the word *etzev* does not mean pain. Haamek Davar explained that it was not an expression of pain but rather of toil. In Sefer Mishlei, the word *etzev* is mentioned, "*b'chol etzev yehiye motar*," "with all toil there is gain" [8]. Chava's punishment was not the pain associated with labor and delivery but the toil of bringing a child into the world. Today, women have to work very hard to bring a child into this world because of Chava's actions, but it's not because they are being punished, but because so much good comes from toiling.

I once learned that Hashem changed the world after the sin, not because He wanted to punish us, but because once man acquired knowledge from eating from the eitz hadaat, Hashem had to change the world to reflect what we now need instead of what we needed pre-sin. So yes, labor and delivery is painful, and yes, it's painful because Chava sinned, but the pain itself is not a punishment. Hashem is making us toil because that is what this changed world needs. When women scream in pain while delivering their baby, they are toiling for something priceless, they're toiling for one of the biggest gifts in the world. Concentrating on this, rather than the idea that it is a punishment, might just make the whole experience a little more tolerable and a lot more meaningful.

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References

[1] Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. Stages of labor and birth: Baby it's time! Stages of labor and birth: Baby, it's time! - Mayo Clinic (retrieved January 21, 2024)

[2] Shemot 1:15-19

[3] Rashi on Shemot 1:15

[4] Shemot 1:21

[5] Rashi on Shemot 1:21

[6] Kitzur Ba'al Haturim on Shemot 1:15

[7] Bereishit 1:16

[8] Haamek Davar on Bereishit 1:16