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# Birth in Israel

By Lissa Szajnbrum

I was incredibly lucky when I gave birth to my first child 22 years ago in Jerusalem. I was lucky that there was a hospital that gave women freedom of choice and options when giving birth. I was lucky that I had a wonderful midwife who, by her expertise, helped me birth my son with no interventions whatsoever. This empowering birthing experience changed my life. While living in the United States for my next two births, I chose a free-standing birth center and only wanted a midwife to attend to me. Returning to Jerusalem I gave birth to my subsequent three children in my “dream hospital”. Now the hospital had a private birthing room on the top floor; this was my obvious choice. Again, I had a caring attentive midwife guide me through my births.

Alas, this hospital closed down 12 years ago. While the many excellent hospitals in Israel claim to support “natural birth”, the reality is far from this. The birth rate in Israel is high, with an average of almost 3 births per woman, but there are many women who give birth to 6 or more babies. Thus, the maternity wards in Israel are almost always full and busy.

The health system in Israel provides free prenatal care to every woman, free hospitalization for up to three days after giving birth, a government supplement for every birth and three months of paid maternity leave. Most hospitals give childbirth education classes and there are many options for pre- and post-natal exercise classes. Israel loves babies and there are many social support systems in place to help women before, during and after birth. All births are done by midwives, unless a woman decides to pay privately for a doctor.

Despite all these options, many women arrive at the hospital without having any childbirth education classes, frightened at the prospect of having any pain, and immediately choose the epidural. This can partially explain why 70-80% of women in Israel have an epidural. Even the staff, while claiming to support a woman’s choice in childbirth and “natural birth”, begins suggesting an epidural from the very beginning of the labor. At a recent birth, I overheard a young midwife speaking to the staff, exclaiming “Why shouldn’t she have an epidural? Why should she have a trauma for her first birth? She won’t want to have more kids!”

Many hospitals even have “natural birthing rooms”, equipped with a birthing rope, chair, bathtub and a big bed for labor. Unfortunately these rooms do not get a lot of use, as the woman has to commit to not using any interventions in her labor and it also depends on the availability of the

midwives to commit to this one birth, which is often in a room not adjacent to the other labor and delivery rooms.

Homebirths constitute a small percentage of births in Israel, approximately 500 a year. There is one free-standing birth center in the center of Israel, run by a well-known and experienced midwife. Actually they are little cottages alongside her home in an agricultural community. These well-equipped cottages offer a homebirth-like atmosphere; while still close enough to a hospital. The midwife who began this is considered a pioneer in Israel. She has authored a book on homebirth in Israel and offers a postpartum convalescence, also in cottages alongside her home. There are also a few other home-based birth centers dispersed throughout Israel.

Doula-training is on the rise, at times the supply outweighing the demand! There is heightened awareness here of how helpful a doula can be, and is not just considered a western-imported luxury. Most hospitals welcome doulas into the delivery room; yet there are other hospitals who demand that women use their own hospital-based doulas, often at a higher cost than private doulas. Some hospitals have volunteer doulas on call for women who may want them.

Unfortunately, birth in Israel is still highly interventionist. The cesarean rate as of 2008 was 20%. Episiotomies are used in 17% of the births and the epidural rate, as mentioned above, stands at 70-80%. If a woman enters her labor informed and educated with enough support, it is probable she will have a positive birth experience. But many women are passive in their births, depending on the medical staff to decide for them how to birth their baby. There is a lot of pressure “not to suffer” during the birth and even breastfeeding is not always seen as essential.

Israel is a family-centered culture and society and the government greatly encourages childbirth. Unfortunately most medical staff still considers birth a “medical event”, while paying lip service to “natural childbirth”. Many women don’t know what to expect and depend on the medical staff to guide them. Progress is slowly being made; there are many programs available training childbirth educators, doulas, alternative therapies, and postpartum support. Hopefully theory and practice will soon meet and then Israel will truly have a progressive model for childbirth.

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*Lissa Szajnbrum is originally from San Diego, CA but has called Israel home for nearly 30 years. In Israel, she works as a doula.*