

THE
PIONEER
PROJECT

Essays by Jewish Mothers for
Any and All Future Mothers

Edited by Melody Coven and Tracy Frydberg

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Cover design and artwork by Emily Wind

*To my husband. Who schools me in being a parent
(and human being in general) every day of the week.*

Foreword

Pioneer – noun; a person who is among those who first enter or settle a region, thus opening it for occupation and development by others.

Laying in a delivery room bed, waiting to be induced, fear engulfed me. How was I ready to become a mom? It felt like the only mom I knew was... well, my own mom. My husband and I were the first couple to have children out of our group of friends, and as such, I had absolutely no idea what to expect. The good, the bad, the first smiles, the tantrums? I had no clue what was about to come.

They say that no one and nothing can prepare you for parenthood. In some ways, that can be true. But in others, this couldn't be more off the mark. There are so many things I wish someone had told me, basically all of which can be summed up as, "This feeling you're feeling? Yeah, it's normal. You're not alone." And thus, *The Pioneer Project* was born.

I set out to collect essays from other mothers, with the goal of sharing completely unsugarcoated, totally real accounts of motherhood that could be shared with an audience of future mothers. Knowing that you're not alone is perhaps one of the

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most simultaneously comforting and empowering feelings there is. This series of essays was compiled to help you feel exactly that.

Thank you to the fabulous mothers who took time out of their already insane lives to collect and share their thoughts for this anthology. Without them, this project would not have been possible.

A pioneer is a person who is among the first to enter a region, opening it up for others to occupy it, too. Well, there are plenty of us out there pioneering motherhood for you, and we're here to document our messy web of crazy thoughts and observations to enable you to one day more smoothly occupy motherhood yourself.

— Melody Coven

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Your Life Is about to Completely Change

Rachel Weber Leshaw

I have a long list of things you shouldn't say to a pregnant woman. Don't tell her, "Oh, I guessed you were pregnant before you told me." Don't ask when she conceived. And don't regale her with stories about how you threw up every single day of your pregnancy and you delivered two weeks late. Yes, these are examples from personal experience.

But all of those seem pretty obvious, compared to the one piece of advice that everyone thought was helpful. Please don't tell a pregnant woman, "Your life is about to completely change." This cliché line comes in so many forms, and every single one made my transition to motherhood that much more difficult. Let me take you through a few examples.

"Your life is about to completely change. The moment you see your baby for the first time, you'll just feel this breathtaking love wash over you." You know what I thought the first time I saw my baby? "Oh my god, it looks like an alien." Then you know what I thought? "I can't believe I pushed that out of my vagina. Man, that really hurt." Then I thought, "Hey, cool, we have a baby!" And so on and so forth. Guess what I did not think. You

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got it. I did not think, “Wow, I love this baby with every fiber of my being.”

Now just to be clear, my son is the most perfect human being to exist in the history of the world; I’m totally convinced of this. And I remember the day he was born, thinking he was such a cute little newborn and not wrinkly like all those other babies, and we posted our cute family picture on Facebook, and I was overwhelmed with emotion. I was happy and excited and relieved, but I was also exhausted and in pain and scared. And I was not in love.

And so in addition to all those emotions I mentioned above, I was also feeling guilty that I didn’t love my baby yet. My first Jewish mother’s guilt. I was immediately inducted into the club. Because how could I not be head-over-heels for this shriveled little being? Everyone said I was going to. I must be a bad mother. I’m going to have to pretend to love him my entire life, and I’ll always be faking it, and this isn’t what everyone said motherhood was going to be like. I was a mess.

Of course, I didn’t have to pretend to love my child for his whole life. As soon as I got over the pain and the hormones of childbirth, I started feeling that connection, and I’ll spare you the unnecessary sweet details, because that’s not why we’re here. We’re here because every new mom is a mess in her own way, but this doesn’t need to be one of the ways. There is no reason for a mom to feel guilty that she doesn’t immediately feel that connection. Childbirth is hard enough; there’s no reason to add pressure to feel a certain way in its immediate aftermath. Of course my life changed when I had a baby, and the love I feel for him is breathtaking and wonderful, but I wish I had been able to figure that out on my own instead of feeling guilty that it didn’t follow someone else’s timeline.

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“Your life is about to completely change. Being a mother is going to totally change your identity as a person. You’ll start thinking of yourself as a mother first, and only then as a wife and a human being.” Remember that Jewish mother’s guilt I talked about before? Well, it did not go away once I realized I loved my baby. Because I was still failing as a mother. You know why? Because sometimes I thought about things that weren’t the baby. Because I wanted to have adult conversations with my husband. Because I wanted to do other adult things with my husband. (Doing those adult things after you have a baby can be a little different, but that’s for another piece. Suffice it to say, it’s definitely doable.)

I was home with a newborn on maternity leave, and I was basically wearing pajamas twenty four hours a day, and we had some great cuddly moments, but I was still me. And I loved my baby, but I didn’t love being a mom. It didn’t feel like a role I was naturally suited for. And so I felt guilty. Guilty that I wanted to go out with friends, guilty that I wanted to wear clothes without spit-up on them, guilty that I was bored at home. You know what? Newborns really don’t do much. They’re not such great companions. But if I was supposed to be a mother first, and everything else later, what did it say that I liked being a wife better than being a mom?

Maternity leave is hard for many moms - it can be isolating and a strange break from routine, and of course you have to take care of a tiny pooping machine who wants to eat every three hours, and you may actually be feeding him out of your own sleep-deprived body. So I hate the fact that in addition to all those things, I saddled myself with guilt for not loving being a mom, for not feeling the way I thought a mother was supposed to feel, for not fully inhabiting my new role the way people told me I would so naturally.

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It's been almost two years since then, and last week for the first time, I accidentally referred to myself as "Mommy" while talking to my husband. Along the way, I clearly inhabited the role. But it didn't happen the way I thought it would, where I woke up one day and felt like a mom. It happened as I caught spit-up in my hand, and changed a blowout diaper at a cousin's bar mitzvah, and grabbed a baby who was about to fall off my bed, and cried when I didn't catch the baby who fell off a stool and banged his nose into the washing machine. Somewhere in there, I started feeling like a mom.

And yet that didn't make me feel less like a wife. My relationship with my husband only became more important as we became partners in parenthood. And this sounds so obvious to me as I write it now. I hope everyone reading this thinks, "Of course! You didn't know that?" But while I may have known that intellectually, emotionally I believed the woman who told me my priorities would be completely different as a mom. Adding "mother" to the list of my identities is one of the things I'm most proud of in my life, but I shouldn't have felt that it needed to come at the expense of all the others.

"Your life is about to completely change. You won't be doing all those fun activities around the city you and your husband love to do. But don't worry, it will be great." This one was the worst, because people were trying to be genuinely helpful. They thought they were doing me a favor by preparing me for how different life was going to be with a newborn. But you know what they really did? They made me dread the baby's arrival. They made me worry about how different my life was going to be after the baby came, and how if I didn't have fun before I gave birth, I wouldn't be able to have fun until my kids went to college.

There's a small part of me that wants to thank the people who told me this. Because it made me so adamant that I not

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let it happen. When our baby was born, my husband and I told ourselves that we weren't going to let him ruin our lives. And you know what people forgot to tell me? Babies are portable. Especially the little ones! In the first three months of his life, our son looked at art in museums, enjoyed the music at street fairs, picked blueberries, went to the beach, cheered at a baseball game, toured a bourbon distillery, got caught in the pouring rain, and steered sailboats. (Ok, he didn't really steer the sailboat, that was just for the cute picture.)

But I'm not really thankful to the people who led me to believe none of that was going to happen. Really I'm thankful for a good baby carrier and a pretty chill baby who put up with our expeditions. And I'm thankful to the friends and family we trusted enough to watch our baby while we had our own adventures, like rock-climbing on our first post-baby date or borrowing a golf cart at a wedding and driving around a golf course in fancy clothes.

These things actually got harder as the baby got older, but we set a solid foundation by schlepping him around with us when he was little, so we were used to it as he got older and slightly less portable. I wasted so much time worrying about how much less fun life would be after the baby was born, because that's what I was prepared for. Instead, I discovered that people parent differently, and our style of parenting involved bringing that baby wherever we wanted to go. I will acknowledge that this aspect of our lives did change after we had the baby in two main ways: one – it took much longer to get out of the house, because there's always something you forgot to put in the diaper bag. But more importantly, the second change was that our Facebook pictures started getting so many more likes. A picture of a couple picking blueberries – ok, that's nice. A picture of a baby picking blueberries – my phone could barely handle the notification overload.

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So what do I tell my pregnant friends? After checking that they want to hear my thoughts, and they don't just want to vent about their swollen feet/fingers/stomach etc., this is what I say: your life is about to completely change. Probably. In some ways. This is going to be the biggest adventure of your life. I can't tell you what it's going to be like. I can share my own experience, but it won't be yours. I can only tell you that it's going to be an incredible ride, and there are some parts you won't enjoy, but I hope that those parts will mostly be overshadowed by the million little moments that you'll treasure.

Rachel lives in Jerusalem, Israel, with her husband, two-year-old son, eight-month-old daughter, and too many toy trucks to count.

Do You Feel Like a Mom?

Melody Coven

I'll start from the beginning. When the hell is the beginning anyway? The "plus" on the stick? The call to your best friend freaking out? The call to your husband because you idiotically peed on the stick while he was at work? Sometimes I feel like it hasn't even begun and she's almost a year-and-a-half old already. After hours of feeling nothing and blessing G-d for epidurals, followed by hours of not being able to feel my legs but sure as hell feeling that baby break open my vagina with her head, a midwife put a screaming little ball of gooey skin onto my chest; I was a mom.

I didn't feel like one. Don't confuse being a mom with feeling like a mom. It is NOT the same thing. Shocking piece of information number one that no one tells you. Do you think you'll be a great mom? Super. Now get that garbage out of your head and remember that it has absolutely nothing to do with how you're going to feel, lying in a hospital, sweaty and exhausted and likely covered in remnants of your own poop and globs of jelly they wiped all over your stomach to get a good reading on the baby monitor, and couple it with days of no sleeping and pushing your body to limits so epic, women can't seem to shut up about it. When they dump the foreign, crying, cone-head skin blob onto

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your tummy, you might not feel like a mom. And that's ok. You're going to be great. But it won't be like *Leave It to Beaver* yet.

I didn't love my dear little one that day. I didn't love her yet. It scared the hell out of me, but I hope one day it won't scare you if that's the card you're dealt. I didn't even know the kid. I didn't recognize her, for G-d's sake. I couldn't have picked her out of the nursery if my life depended on it after they wheeled me away. And only now am I starting to really understand and hold how okay that is.

I got diagnosed with postpartum depression and anxiety shortly after my baby was born. After a rough pregnancy, it felt like a cherry on top of things that could go wrong. So it might have taken me longer to love my baby than it'll take you to love yours. But if you aren't connecting to your little one just yet, know it's coming. Take a deep breath, and if at all possible, for the love of G-d, take a nice long nap.

Flash forward. Nursing. Who thought of that, am I right? Let's take your overly sexualized, big yummy, cut me off of a piece of that and slap the PG-13 part onto the cover of a magazine, breasts and make them provide nourishment for your new alien child. Oh, and let's force you to do it at 2 hour intervals just to make sure you get no sleep on top of it and a heavy dose of guilt in case it doesn't go exactly as planned. One more thing; we'll make it virtually as difficult as building a piece of Ikea furniture but put lots of little dogs and cats around who can do it no problem, so you feel like a full blown idiot when you have to pay an effing lactation consultant to come show you how to do what your own damn dog can do without help.

Nursing. You pick up your little blob of joy and beauty and skin and confusion and precious little toes ,and you stick it on your boob. On your nipple. Make it look like a burrito. Or maybe it was a pita. Some stupid food. And how much breast tissue are

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they getting? Like, what? I used to be so good at school. Any question in class, man, I could answer it. But now the questions on your path to success have to do with how much boob you shoved into your baby's mouth. And you officially wonder what on earth your life has become. Don't even get me started on pumping. That goes from weirdly sexual, non-sexual boob-eating to let's-make-mommy-look-like-cattle. Yes, I've milked myself. There, I said it. And one day, you probably will too. The best is manually doing it on Shabbat because you can't use the battery-powered pump. Suddenly life is so far from law school and finals and Long Island ice teas and everything else that's defined your surroundings for... well, until you looked up one day and realized it didn't.

Motherhood. What a weird freakin' journey it's been so far. Flash forward again. And why do we flash forward? Well, first of all, because I barely remember the first nine months. You basically just black out and turn your body on a sleep-deprived miraculous autopilot in which you narrowly avoid killing your kid while you sleep with your eyes open. And then smile and tell people how magical your life has become. And you're not lying, but you're totally lying.

Sometimes, motherhood is sheer, unadulterated boredom. It's the kind of boredom you have when your husband gets to work, but you have to sit and entertain a mute little human with rapidly changing interests but who volunteers no suggestions for activities for hours on end. Let's sing Elmo. Watch Elmo, though? Absolutely not. As IF you're the kind of mother who allows screens. I don't want to raise a drug addict. No no, we'll be singing Elmo or perhaps making a dance party with a soundtrack from The Beatles that Mommy found on YouTube, but she makes sure the screen is facing away. Because values. And then five minutes have gone by and so has "She loves you, yeah yeah

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yeah,” and you still have 3 hours and 55 minutes until you can start bedtime routine.

BEDTIME ROUTINE. There’s a good one. You want to talk about perfectionism gone wrong, even though sometimes it’s so cute and sweet to watch the moms do their crazy mom-loving things? I gave my baby a customized personal- wait for it- baby massage every single night for many months on end before I put her down to sleep. I had a job, I had no spouse at home on week nights, and I somehow convinced myself that, in addition to dinner, bath, and the completely unnecessary lullaby that I would sing, that I too should provide a spa experience for my three-month-old before she hit the pillow (just kidding, pillows kill babies. Everyone knows that). Yes, dinner time. Bath time. Massage time. *Somewhere Over The Rainbow* time. Bed time. Every single night. I hadn’t even had dinner and usually wouldn’t even get to it. But G-d forbid, my precious angel alien wouldn’t get a nightly massage.

Motherhood is a funny thing. I want to bond so badly with my baby. And also, a lot of the time I just want distance from the damn thing. And also, some of the bonding activities make me more neurotically terrified about how we haven’t bonded. And usually, I feel the most bonded to her when I’m not trying. I hate that advice though. Stop thinking about it, and it will come? What super mom ever stopped thinking about bonding with her baby? I don’t think so; not this girl.

There’s so much more to say, but I guess I just want you to know, the only thing you can certainly expect is that it’ll be a clusterfuck of not what you thought. It will probably be different from my experience with commonalities here and there that make you smile and feel relaxed because you know you’re not alone. But you are a mom. When you become a mom, you are a

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mom. Whether you feel like one or not. And if you don't feel like one, it's just a sign that everything's going exactly as it should.

My baby is now barely a baby. She's entered "toddler" territory. I love her so much my cheeks and face and heart hurt just thinking about it. I watch her sleep more nights than I feel comfortable admitting in writing, and the more she talks and shares her gift of a personality with the world, the more that I can see that she loves me and my husband just as much as we love her. Somewhere along the trail of baby massages and cuddles and poop-splosions, I grew into my role as a mom. Frankly, a pretty kick-ass one. And it's as gloriously awesome as my perfect angel of a baby is.

After several years in Jerusalem, Melody lives in Skokie, IL, with her super-hero husband and adorably, sometimes-too-perfect baby girl.

Formula Feeding is Just Fine Too

Shira Zwiren

The number one piece of advice I would give an expectant or new mother is to be prepared for anything. That doesn't mean you should start worrying about every possible complication, but don't assume anything about how your pregnancy, labor, and birth experience will go, let alone anything that comes afterward.

When I was pregnant with my first child, I was set on nursing my baby until at least the age of six months, the recommended amount of time according to *The American Academy of Pediatrics*. I read about the pros and cons, about proper latching, mastitis and how to deal with it, and researched what kind of pump I should get. I eagerly looked forward to holding my newborn skin-to-skin immediately after she was born and getting her to latch on for our first precious moments of parent-child bonding.

Then, my daughter was born via C-section and whisked away to the NICU to receive preventative antibiotics, because I had a fever during labor.

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After about two hours in the recovery area, I was finally brought to my room. It was about 2:30 in the morning. The main requirement for leaving the recovery area was the ability to move my legs because the hospital transport personnel were not allowed to help me from the transportation bed into my hospital bed. When we got to my room, I somehow maneuvered myself from one bed to the other, relieved to finally be able to go to sleep. I had never felt so drained and tired in my life.

Then the NICU called. It was time to feed my baby. Did I want to come try to nurse her?

Yes! Yes, I did! But I was so tired and could not move. Like, at all.

“I have to go nurse my baby,” I said to the night nurse who had brought me a whole pitcher of water and a stack of cups.

She looked at me and almost laughed.

“No, you don’t,” she said. “You’re not going anywhere. You’re going to sleep.”

Too exhausted to fight her, I downed the pitcher of water instead. Besides, she was right.

The next day, the pain from surgery set in. I didn’t let that stop me, though. I was determined to nurse my baby! I waited about an hour and a half for a transport to come wheel me to her.

There she was -- the healthiest baby in the NICU. She wore a cute yellow knitted hat made by some old ladies who donated their knitting to NICU babies (even healthy NICU babies who were only there for precautionary measures). Her skin was so pale it was almost translucent. Her eyes were like blueberries. She was beautiful. And she was hungry.

A nurse handed her to me, and I tried to have her latch on. It worked, sort of. But she was screaming out of hunger. I wanted to nurse her, but she was not getting anything from me and I was afraid she was starving. I was also still exhausted and in pain. I

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just wanted to feed my baby and snuggle with her, whether it was through breastfeeding or a bottle. At that moment, I didn't care.

So bottle it was. I cradled her as I fed her from a tiny two-ounce Similac bottle that looked more like a test tube with a nipple on the end. She was my beautiful baby, and I was providing for her. Who cared if it was through vitamin-enriched, iron-fortified formula?

Throughout my stay in the hospital, I continued to try and breastfeed my daughter. Because she wasn't in the room with me, I also had to pump. This was where the real trouble started.

I hated pumping.

I felt like a cow hooked up to a milking machine.

There was also never a good time to do it. People were always coming in and out of my room, whether it was visitors, nurses, or doctors. I hardly ever had a stretch of privacy where I could feel uncomfortable by myself instead of in front of an audience.

By the time we were discharged from the hospital, my daughter had been exclusively formula-fed.

After about a day at home, my milk finally came in. But by that point, I was in pain from my incision and healing muscles, exhausted from staying up all night with my newborn, and overwhelmed by the thought I might never sleep again. I thought about starting to nurse. Then I thought about the pain of it and the complications. It was too much. My daughter was so happy and thriving well on formula. I was happy others were able to feed her when I needed some recuperation time. I didn't want to throw another wrench in the mix when things were already difficult.

So formula feeding it was.

My daughter is currently a bright, curious, energetic three-year-old. She has adjusted to life beautifully. She loves to play, has a vivid imagination, and tries to discover the answers to all

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the “why’s” in the world. She, my husband, and I have a tight family bond. I would not change a thing about the way we are raising her; that she was bottle-fed has no impact on her life whatsoever.

I felt guilty about not nursing my daughter for a long time. But the fact is, breast is not necessarily best. You have to take all factors into consideration, and it is always good to be skeptical of blanket statements about absolutes. So while I did not feed my daughter the way that I had planned before she was born, I fed her in the way that was best for both her and myself given our situation.

Some new research over the past few years shows that the claimed benefits of breastfeeding over bottle-feeding are not necessarily accurate. In a study about siblings where some were breastfed and some were bottle fed, no significant difference was found regarding intelligence, BMI, reading and math skills, and hyperactivity.¹ An article on the *New York Times* blog writes about a similar study, suggesting that it is not the way a baby is fed but the kind of family into which the baby is born that brings about the benefits often mistakenly attributed to breastfeeding.²

Breastfeeding is a good way to feed your baby. So is bottle-feeding. As long as you are making the healthiest choice for you and your baby (nutritionally healthy, as well as mentally and emotionally healthy), you are doing what is “best.”

In the end, we are all parents trying to make the best choices we can for our children. It’s not about how we feed them. Or diaper them. Or tote them around. It’s about loving them and being the best parents we can be to them, taking into account

1 <http://time.com/9917/sibling-study-shows-little-difference-between-breast-and-bottle-feeding>

2 https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/03/04/is-breast-feeding-really-better/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=2

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our different personal and family situations. Motherhood can't be about controlling everything to fit previous assumptions or expectations. You (and your children) will likely not find happiness in parenting that way. Motherhood is about assessing the often unexpected or unpredictable needs of your family and then meeting those needs in the best way you can.

Because caring for the overall physical, mental, and emotional health of our families? That's what's best.

Shira is a freelance writer living on Long Island with her husband, daughter, and one on the way!

Embracing the Crazy

Beth Cohen-Dorfman

I have a degree in early childhood education, and all I ever wanted to be was a mom. My desire and degree provided me with an unhealthy arrogance toward parenting. When I was pregnant with my first child, a number of my friends were new moms. They talked about their difficulties with everything from exhaustion to breastfeeding to schedule setting. Arrogant, pregnant me said things like (and I cringe when I remember this), “I have terrible insomnia; sleep deprivation is nothing new to me,” and, “If you want breastfeeding to work badly enough, it will,” and, “It’s just a little baby; it’ll sleep when it’s tired in a stroller.” Oh. My. Good. Lord. Can you imagine?! I actually called these same women after my daughter was born and apologized because no amount of insomnia can prepare you for the kind of exhaustion that a new baby provides, and breastfeeding may be natural, but it’s *not* easy.

I had all of these grand plans about childbirth and parenting. We took Bradley classes. We switched from a traditional ObGyn to a midwife. We watched so many videos of women birthing that the concept was no longer foreign or scary.

I went into labor on December 16, 2006, nine days early, and while my husband ran to his office to get his work computer, I

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went to Marshall's because I adamantly refused to wear maternity pants home from the hospital and I didn't own sweatpants. (This was way back in 2006, before everyone wore yoga pants 24/7). My friend, who'd gone with us to all of our Bradley classes, was doing counter pressure on my back in the checkout line, and the cashier looked at me and asked if I should be at the hospital. My friend said, "No. Not yet." The cashier then asked if I was going down to DSW next. I laughed and said that if I could see my feet, I'd have considered it.

We went to the hospital at my husband's urging before I was ready to go. I was having terrible back labor, which stopped entirely at four centimeters when we got to the hospital around 1 p.m. We listened to the music we'd brought, sat on the yoga ball, showered, walked around (I couldn't sit at all), and decided to have them break my water around 5 p.m. I went from four to seven centimeters in thirty minutes and felt like a failure when I got my epidural.

At 7:52 p.m., after a mere twenty minutes of pushing, my midwife put that warm, slimy baby on my chest. I announced her gender. We cried. The labor and delivery nurses commented on how loudly she cried, and I remember thinking, even while being stitched up, that was probably not a great omen.

I was absolutely going to breastfeed. Period. It was painful and difficult, and the hospital didn't send a lactation consultant until the morning I was going to be discharged. We took that little baby home and wondered, "What now?"

Let me tell you about the next year.

My amazingly beautiful baby cried. A lot. More than I thought possible. She spit up after every feeding. It felt like a waste of time to feed her. Every shirt I owned was covered in color on color spit up stains. I smelled like sour milk. My insomnia hadn't prepared me at all. Before the baby, when I was tired, I could rest and tend

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to myself, because I was all I needed to take care of. Now, I was beyond tired, and I still had to take care of this small person who literally sapped every ounce of energy out of me and required my near-constant attention. For reasons unknown to me with the benefit of retrospect, I refused to call a lactation consultant despite the fact that my husband's cousin is one. All of my postpartum anxiety surrounded feeding her, and I wouldn't let anyone help me. It was like I was temporarily insane. Thank G-d I found nipple shields; they saved me, and after a really rough few weeks, she figured out how to latch.

She gained weight and grew and started smiling, but I was stretched really thin. It was insanely cold that winter, and she hated the car, so I felt trapped in the house. I remember feeling free while picking up Chinese food for dinner one night in negative-ten-degree wind chills. I'd left my job, and my husband was resistant to the idea of my getting a babysitter. But one night, when she was about six weeks old, he came home from work and I told him, with more seriousness than not, that if I didn't get a sitter for a few hours a few times a week, he'd come home from work one day and one of us would be gone. I wasn't sure which one. We found Annie the next week. She came Mondays and Fridays from 3-6 p.m. I've said on many occasions that she saved us. The first time she came, I took the cat to the vet, came home, and shoveled the driveway. It felt glorious, truly glorious to be away from my baby, in the freezing cold, shoveling and sweating (in the pants I'd bought while in labor!).

Things leveled out, but I was still so tired. I'd read a book that suggested tracking all sleeping/waking/feeding times, which sounded like something to do. As this was before smartphones and apps, I created an Excel spreadsheet, and because I love spreadsheets and I'm really visual, I color-coded it. I learned that my kid would go to sleep fine so long as she was in bed by 6 p.m.

Embracing the Crazy

She'd sleep till 5:30 or 6 in the morning but not straight through, and she was always mine. She was in bed before my husband got home, and I woke up with her in the night and morning because he needed to work. She didn't know him, and she'd melt down when he tried to hold her on the weekends. In my delirium, I devised a plan that *he* would wake up with her in the morning so I could sleep a little later (we were supplementing with formula). I expected that he'd jump at the chance to do this; I was wrong. It took considerable cajoling to get him on board, but he gave in, and to this day, he is up with her (and her brother) every day but Sunday. It is their time. (When she was about eighteen months old, I got her up one morning on the weekend and she asked, "Where's Daddy?" This made him insanely happy.)

I'd planned on being a mom who ran around with her kid sleeping in a stroller. I had a kid who needed to be in *her* bed and *her* room to sleep. Traveling was awful—she wouldn't sleep. Our life became ruled by her schedule, because if her needs were met, she was happy; when they were not met, she was impossible. It was vital to our wellbeing as parents to keep her happy. She was like a little tyrant. I'd planned on being an easy-going mom, but my Type-A infant killed that. I often say that those first few months were the longest years of my life. I'd look at her and be in shock that she was already three months old, and simultaneously in shock that she wasn't yet leaving for college.

Aside from Annie (who would walk in and plan the three outfits she'd put on after the initial one was spit up on), what got me through that first year was my NPN (Neighborhood Parents Network) New Moms Group. I started meeting with them in March 2007. We all had babies between two and five months, and suddenly, I wasn't the only person feeling overwhelmed and alone. I wasn't the only person whose baby spit up explosively after every feeding. I wasn't the only person

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whose baby didn't magically sleep through the night. I wasn't the only person completely annoyed that her husband needed explicit instructions for *everything* and then proceeded to do things in another way altogether. I remember my friend who was with us when my daughter was born asking if we in the group were really friends or if we just all had babies. I told her that we'd been discussing our sex lives (or lack thereof), so I guessed we were friends. We met religiously as an entire group for nearly two years. The group dwindled down to a smaller group that continued to meet till the original babies were in kindergarten.

I love being a parent, but parenting is *hard*. We all study and plan before getting a job, and most of us read a lot before our babies are born. We take birthing classes, breastfeeding classes, and CPR. We find the safest car seats and strollers. We hire professionals to baby-proof our homes. But there is literally no way to prepare how to parent, because we never know to whom we'll give birth. Babies are all so different, and we cannot plan for them. From the moment we get pregnant, all of our planning is for naught. That baby, from the start, is in charge. She is in charge of your pregnancy, your body, your birth (plan away moms, but other than "I want the baby to be expelled from my body," you have virtually no say in how that expulsion will occur), your sleep—your very sanity. She is in charge of when you go out, how long you can stay, and whether your day is happy or sad. Her mood will determine yours in the way that you'll look at her at 10 a.m. one day and realize that you're both wearing purple. Parenting is all about letting go of all of your type-A, OCD tendencies and embracing the crazy, haphazard, wonderful, terrifying, sleepless, joyful glory that is raising a human. Let go, *momma*, and the happiness will follow.

Beth lives in Chicago with her husband, two kids, and dog.

Ten Surprises about Becoming a Mother

Varda Bachrach

Sometimes it helps to know that you are not alone. With that in mind, I have listed below some of the most profound and surprising parts of becoming a parent that I have experienced so far.

1. Pregnancy: You are a supreme goddess.

My early pregnancy symptoms completely passed me by. I was hiking the northern mountains of Thailand and disappointed in myself for struggling. I assumed that my exhaustion reflected a lack of fitness.

When I found out that I was pregnant, I developed a fear of going to the bathroom, convinced I would accidentally squeeze the baby out. I then developed an intense revulsion from rice (not great when you are traveling in Asia) and randomly threw up in public places.

Most of all, I marveled at the wonderful human being I was, creating life inside me. Even when I was vegging on the sofa, which I did a lot of after returning home, I felt like a supreme goddess.

Ten Surprises about Becoming a Mother

2. Birth: It may not go as planned.

I loved being pregnant so much I never wanted it to end. And it didn't. Well it did, but not until I was way overdue and induced. My plans for a completely natural birth were ended by a stubborn, indignant, forty-three-week-pregnant woman, holding a stream of boiling water to her belly, refusing to get out of the shower until the anesthetist arrived.

3. What happens after birth

After giving birth, being stitched up (sorry), and holding my dear sweet newborn girl for a while, she was wheeled away by my husband, and I was wheeled away too, taken along some corridors, and left alone in a hallway.

Minutes or hours later, I really couldn't tell you which, baby and I were reunited. I was in a ward by now, and my hubby wheeled her in.

"Are we allowed to pick her up?" I asked. That's how unprepared I was.

4. Taking baby home was neurotic yet calm.

There were certain things I did with my firstborn that I didn't do with the others. For example, I would shower and go to the bathroom in installments so I could run to the living room in the middle to check that she hadn't suddenly stopped breathing, and I only dressed her in clothes that I thought were nice enough to wear myself.

However, I also spent hours blissfully nursing her, awed at her curiosity and felt a strong sense of calmness in her presence, as she did in mine. There was a time where I could put her to sleep by staring into her eyes while very, very gently rocking her in a chair.

5. Back to work: What did I just do?

I loved maternity leave. I felt fulfilled and valuable, but I had to go back to work.

We took a nanny; it was our precious number one. Said nanny was extremely experienced and recommended. We had a trial day before I started back at work. It seemed like a great idea. She came around and took the baby for a walk.

In other words, I handed my baby over to a complete stranger and let her take her away. I tried calling the nanny; she didn't answer. I hyperventilated. Twenty minutes later, they returned, all smiling and happy.

6. Number two is a completely different kettle of fish.

I did not like being back at work, so I hatched a cunning plan. I got pregnant again. Unlike pregnancy number one, there was no basking in the miracle taking place inside my body. There was working full time, then coming home and taking care of a baby, exhaustion and sickness included.

By birth number two, I knew better. I was having an epidural. I forgot that the birth may not go as planned (see point number two). I didn't get an epidural; I had a natural birth.

Number three was natural too. It could have gone either way; it doesn't matter though. What matters is the end result: the baby.

7. Baby number two looked nothing like baby number one.

I was shocked. Without a doubt, the most surprising moment of motherhood for me was this.

8. Babies are not all the same.

It's not just that they don't look the same. They each have their own individual personalities. This is possibly the biggest challenge when going from one to two. You have learned how to parent the child you have; parenting your next child may be different.

9. My two-year-old said shit.

She had dropped something.

At age three, she asked how babies are made, so I told her. When her daddy walked in the door that evening, she asked when he was going to put his seed inside mummy.

10. The paradox of parenting

As much as your children are their own people, they learn so much from you. They see how you treat others, how others treat you. Their basic sense of humanity comes from the home. You are incredibly powerful.

You want to protect your children; you also want to prepare them for life. You want them to be healthy. You want them to be safe. You can't be there for them all of the time. You feel incredibly vulnerable.

As a parent you are at your most powerful and your most vulnerable. It may be the biggest paradox of parenting. I'm with Dr. Spock on this. Trust your instincts.

Varda lives in Tel Aviv. She has three children, a husband, and a full time job. She loves to work-out (or rather how it makes her feel) and hates having a messy house, which doesn't leave much time for her passion—writing.

Breastfeed... Or Die Trying

Stephanie Camaglia Reznick

When I was pregnant with my first child, I knew I would breastfeed. I was breastfed as an infant. Breast is best. There was no other option for me. I did not care about my crazy work schedule after maternity leave. I was determined to breastfeed for the first year or die trying. I didn't realize at the time how literal that statement would be.

I went to the breastfeeding classes and did my research. I thought I knew what to expect, but after I delivered, everyone had different opinions. It shouldn't hurt. It should hurt, just keep going. Position your baby this way. No, no, never position your baby this way. The prenatal class taught me that a baby instinctively knows how to latch. Mine did not. Even while taking post C-section pain medications, the first time I breastfed hurt. A lot. The nurse told me to keep going, so I did. Somehow, even without teeth, she was able to cut my nipple. This led to a superficial skin infection; I was on topical antibiotics before leaving the hospital.

At home, breastfeeding continued to be difficult. There were a lot of tears; more of mine than hers. We saw various lactation

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consultants who all had different tricks of the trade. They all failed. In the meantime, I would pump, and my husband would feed the baby using a feeding tube on his pinkie finger; this protocol would avoid nipple confusion (when a baby has trouble latching because they are used to a bottle) for when breastfeeding was inevitably successful. I loved my baby dearly, but every time I held her, I anticipated her painfully tearing my areola with her surprisingly sharp gums. When I finally admitted to myself that attempting to breastfeed was interfering with my ability to bond with my daughter, I was convinced by others that this was temporary and I should not give up.

Maternity leave sped by, and she was still not successfully latching. As a last resort, we took her to a physician for osteopathic manipulative training. Several sessions later, there was no difference. I finally caved and bought bottles. I was honestly relieved. I would pump so that my daughter could still drink breast milk, but the nightmare of actual breastfeeding was over...or so I thought.

About ten weeks after returning from maternity leave, I was on a particularly grueling rotation as a resident physician. I worked nights, essentially managing all internal medicine admissions to the hospital as well as any emergencies outside of the ER or ICU. There was barely time to eat, let alone pump. Being stubborn, I kept trying, even if it meant pumping less frequently than would be optimal. I ended up with multiple clogged ducts, which were painful, but that wasn't new. One morning, after a particularly chaotic night, my right breast throbbed like I had been stung by several angry wasps. I made a conscious effort not to grasp my breast as I walked to my car. I called my lactation consultant, who luckily was able to see me in the office right away. The exam was less pleasant than having my cervix checked a few months earlier. I was told I may have

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early mastitis. I was prescribed antibiotics and told to call if I did not improve. I did not.

The next morning, my breast was very red and hurt even more. I even pumped what looked like pus. I did not have fevers, chills, or muscle aches, so my obstetrician did not think I had an infection. I called back the lactation specialist, who was at the pediatrician's office, and she ordered an ultrasound. The look on the technician's face said it all. I had a large abscess in my right breast. They immediately called in the surgeon. He recommended repeated drainage using the ultrasound and a needle. Surgery could be tricky in patients actively lactating. The drainage procedure was not what I would call a good time, but I was looking forward to finally feeling better.

When cultures came back, I needed to switch antibiotics. Due to questionable safety of the antibiotic when breastfeeding, it was at that time that I surrendered. My daughter would only receive three months of breast milk; it was time for formula. Thankfully, she only revolted for the first few feeds. Meanwhile, the abscess was not going anywhere. Within hours of my third drainage procedure, I became what is medically known as septic. I spiked a fever and couldn't stop shaking from the chills. My heart was racing at over 130 beats per minute, and my blood pressure had dropped. I was directly admitted to the hospital and started on IV antibiotics, which stopped the worst of my symptoms. The next day, I underwent surgery where they removed sixty milliliters of pus from my right breast. Because the wound was inherently infected, they could not suture it shut. I was sent home with a seven centimeter hole in my breast. With the help of my mother and husband, I had to change out the gauze from inside my breast twice each day. For weeks, I couldn't hold my baby because my chest hurt. The upside was at least I could see her more often, as I had to take a month off of work to heal.

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Days turned into weeks, and eventually, the hole closed. Three years later, my right breast still tinges if the weather changes suddenly. It is a reminder to me of how much I was willing to suffer in order to breastfeed. My essentially formula-fed baby has grown into a wonderful, playful, smart three-year-old. Not breastfeeding will not cause her to go to community college instead of Harvard. She is fine. More than fine. So....why did I do that to myself?

Being a first time mom, I just wanted to do everything right. Therein lies my first mistake. Outside of obvious extremes, there is no right or wrong when it comes to parenting. Many people are going to overwhelm you with advice. They are well-meaning, but they aren't your child's mother. You are. Follow your instinct. Listen to your heart. Know that loving your child is the most important thing you can do; the rest is all detail. If you want to breastfeed and it works for you, wonderful! If you don't want to breastfeed or it doesn't work for you, formula is wonderful! It often feels that our job as a mother is to worry (and we are darn good at it!). Breastfeeding is not one of those things you need to worry about. Worry about something else (which also likely will ultimately be inconsequential). I would recommend you don't worry at all, but I now try to be a realist.

Stephanie is an internal medicine physician; she has a three-year-old daughter.

Due Dates: A Tale of Two Sisters

Sarah Rochel Hewitt

My second child was due on Thanksgiving. I thought that was lovely, except that my mother has a very definitive rule about Thanksgiving at her house, which was, at that time, about three hours away. Since I couldn't come to her, the family came to me (mom, brother, sister-in-law, and two nieces, joined by a few local relatives). They brought most of the food.

Together as a family, we had a delicious and delightful Thanksgiving feast, but I felt as if they all kept looking at me and thinking: "So? Anything?" "How are you feeling?" Well, the one thing I wasn't feeling was the imminent onset of labor. Not a sign of it.

Following the meal, I was in the kitchen washing dishes when I dropped a shot glass into the sink. It smashed, and I yelled, "Oh, it broke!" This, of course, was heard by my extended family as "Oh, my water broke." Sorry guys. One lovely, long family weekend; no baby.

Busy as I was with my nineteen-month-old son, the days that followed Thanksgiving each began with anticipation and ended

Due Dates: A Tale of Two Sisters

with me still pregnant. After a week, I started to wonder if it hadn't all been some sort of divine practical joke.

Ten days into the count, my midwives determined that it was time to make a plan. If I didn't start contractions by Wednesday, then I would have to be induced. My mom came Monday. Tuesday, while my son was in daycare, we watched a *Harry Potter* movie; still no contractions. Late Tuesday night, my son began to throw up. My husband and mother took care of him while I stayed on the sidelines, too large and cumbersome to be of much help. Around 1 a.m., as we tried to make the sick little guy feel better, I felt the first twinges of contractions. They were too far apart and mild to be called labor, but definitely a first step. Six hours later, I was escorted to the hospital by my husband, leaving my mother with the sick, pukey toddler. (Is it fair to say I felt guilty, yet relieved at the same time?)

This was my first, but not my last, experience with Pitocin, a helpful drug that induces labor, but also makes the contractions much more intense. It wasn't pleasant, but it got the job done. It took more time to get me set up with the Pitocin than for me to be ready to deliver.

Going beyond one's due date does have risks, and one of the most common is that the baby will swallow meconium, fetal feces. This is why the midwife told me that there would come a time after the head was delivered that I would be asked to stop pushing. My brain had quite a few colorful responses to that idea. Pushing was hard enough; not pushing was even harder. But shortly thereafter, my beautiful, slightly pickled (a sign of post-due date) daughter was born at nine pounds and two ounces.

Less than two years later, due with my third, I felt scarred by my elongated second pregnancy. I firmly believed that my due date had little relevance to my life (a fact which proved true with numbers four and five). This was a rather worrisome belief,

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because her due date was two weeks before Rosh Hashana and five weeks before we were scheduled to move from New Jersey to Canada.

After researching my options, I asked my midwives if we could schedule an induction for one week after my due date. They, in turn, laughed at me and told me that, given the rather large size of my babies and my lateness with number two, they weren't letting me go a whole week late.

As a Sabbath-observant Jew, I was supposed to take some precautions in case I went into labor on Saturday morning. Put money in an envelope for the cab, buy food to bring with us for the Sabbath meals, etc. Knowing I was already on the hospital schedule for the next week and not really expecting to go into labor on my own, two days before my due date, I had yet to even pack a hospital bag.

Friday morning, I decided that it might be better to be safe and grabbed the necessities. I did not expect anything to happen. "Man plans and God laughs," they say. Saturday morning, the contractions began. We quickly took our other children to a friend's house and called a cab. Our second daughter, weighing in at nine pounds and ten ounces, was born in time for us to have a late Sabbath lunch. Our first and only due date baby.

Sarah, the author of Jewish Treats for NJOP, lives in Montreal, QC, with her husband and five wonderful children.

I'm in This with You

Nurit Siegal

I'm standing at the bottom of the three flights of stairs that lead up to my apartment, gazing hesitantly upward. Every day it's the same trip, but every day I hover over the first step a little longer. I grab a handful of grocery bags in my left hand, a slightly heavier handful in my right, and begin my slow, treacherous hike to the summit.

Nope. Not going to happen. I have to take a break on the first landing step. I text my husband to just, you know, let him know what I'm going through. I breathe in... Okay. Here we go.

I make it to the last step, but I can't get to the door. I collapse on the top landing and close my eyes for a minute. Maybe I can just order Chinese and eat it here.

Clutching the railing for balance, I stand myself up to unlock the apartment, and a sense of accomplishment courses through me. I let the groceries crash onto the floor and collapse onto the couch. No one told me I'd feel like a retired mountain climber at eight months pregnant.

The treacherous stairs, though, were the least of my problems. I had this paralyzing, yet jittery sensation in my chest that would sometimes flare up so unforgivingly, I wouldn't be able to get up from my chair. My mind was occupied with a million fears.

I'm in This with You

Thoughts like *I'm going to disappoint everyone by wanting space and privacy after the baby; I should be glowing and excited, but instead I'm miserable to be around; if I can't handle pregnancy, I have no chance at motherhood.* When I didn't know what to do anymore, I registered for a prenatal yoga class as an attempt to decompress. There was something about being in a room full of other women who could barely touch their knees that comforted me. For the last ten minutes of every session, we would have a guided meditation, and I would just lay there very still with my eyes fixed on the ceiling and tears rolling down my face.

The anxiety was like a demon inside of me. It wasn't me, yet it was in me and taking over, and I was deeply ashamed that I wasn't strong enough to control or stop it.

I became religious in college and believed that my anxiety in pregnancy stemmed from my spiritual shortcomings. If only I could learn to achieve more peace of mind, pray with more intention, plan a more productive day, I could overcome this burden. I would think about my holy great-grandmothers and how they must have had more important things to deal with than to waste time on "anxiety". I would think about all the mothers I knew in my community who seemed to effortlessly manage a kindergarten's worth of children, frequent guests, and happy homes. It was only my first pregnancy, and I could barely manage making ramen noodles for dinner.

When it finally came time to have my baby, I was on a high for about four days postpartum. And then I crashed. Big time. I felt empty inside. I felt overwhelmed and disconnected. I wanted the people who were visiting to leave my house immediately. I wanted my extended family to know better than to stay until one in the morning, holding and cooing at my baby. I needed space,

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privacy, quiet, and time with my little family. But I didn't have the courage to say anything – I didn't feel like I deserved to.

As the months came and went, I began to slowly hear from friends and acquaintances about their experiences with postpartum depression, or prenatal anxiety, or their intense desire to have space and privacy and silence. A friend of mine wrote to me about a moment where she felt herself breaking down. She said:

Right before I was having my in-laws sleep over for the weekend, I had an appointment with a lactation consultant. She told me I had to nurse, feed pumped milk, feed formula, and pump at every feeding! It was not at all sustainable... That night, with everyone in my apartment, I broke down. My baby was being held by someone else and I went to the armchair in her room and just cried. The tears flowed down my cheeks. All my anxiety and worry came to the forefront, and I just couldn't stop crying. I was still physically recovering, nursing, there were way too many people in my apartment... I just couldn't cope. There's a certain sense in society that everyone has babies and is immediately smitten. That was not the case with me. I think I was too overwhelmed and exhausted to feel love.

Before I understood how many of us struggle, I thought I was the only one who felt high-maintenance and selfish. Everyone wants to see the baby, and as the mother, I felt an obligation to allow everyone to visit, even when I desperately needed time alone to recover from the emotional and physical pain. Hearing other women's stories empowered me, and little by little, I stood up

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for myself more often. After my second daughter was born, only about a year later, I said “no” to extended family who wanted to come stay with us, or even visit for a day. And I said “yes!” to formula, when my crippling struggle to breastfeed became too much to bear.

It wasn't until several months of having two kids that I did a 180 in my belief system. I had always thought that I'm just a “sensitive” woman. Someone who can't totally get it together, so she needs to be “gentle” with herself and ask others to be gentle with her. One day, I worked up the courage to talk to a very strong, well-respected woman in my community about the helplessness I had felt in both pregnancy and in motherhood, even though I was sure she wouldn't be able to relate. But instead of just nodding politely, she told me how much *she* had experienced those same feelings while raising her babies. She told me how much help she regularly needed from others, even though it made her feel guilty. She offered stories of when she felt angry or alone or when everything felt like it was falling apart. I was her, and she was me. We were both young mothers in that conversation, talking about our experiences that fell short of an unrealistic fantasy of motherhood.

After that conversation, I knew I had to redefine what I thought it meant to have courage and strength. Contrary to what people may tell you, it's not self-destruction and infinite sacrifice. It's seeking help when you need it. It's sharing your story with others when they need it. I realized the hard way that ignoring my pain is a recipe for isolation. I have a role in creating a more compassionate society. I'm in this with you.

Nurit lives in Chicago with her husband and two daughters.