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Adventures in Birthing Class

By [David Shneer](#)



You want me to touch her where?

As Caryn got closer to her due date, her obstetrician recommended that we take a birthing class offered at the hospital. “You mean it doesn’t just pop out?” I asked Caryn when she informed me and my partner, Gregg, that all three of us would be attending the crash course—a one-day, six-hour marathon of statistics, gruesome videos, and breathing exercises that were clearly designed to make newly expecting parents look ridiculous.

The three of us arrived at the hospital on a Saturday morning. As if a trio of gay parents wasn’t going to draw enough attention, we walked in late. All of the other soon-to-be parents stared at us, clearly trying to figure out how we fit together.

It turns out that the number of parents in our family was not what made us stand out that day. What made us different from the other parents was that we were three over-educated Jewish academics who asked way too many questions. We asked questions about timing, about the relationship between professional medical staff and our family in the delivery room, the pros and cons of anesthetics versus analgesics, the percentage of epidurals given to birthing mothers, and the percentage of complications from various medical interventions. I felt like I was back in school...and I liked it.

House of Pain

Late in the day, we began the unit on “medical interventions” or what I call, “the joys of drugs.” As the nurse described the stages of pain the happy expectant all first-time mothers would be going through, I silently said to myself the prayer that traditional Jewish men say when they wake up in the morning, “Thank god I was not born a woman.”

Sexist, sure, but at this particular moment, I started to understand where the authors of that prayer were coming from.

The nurse tried to soften the blow by talking about the various natural ways women can “respond” to the pain of labor—massage, soft music, yogic breathing. “Respond to pain? How about screaming at the doctor to give me drugs?” I kept thinking. I kept that comment to myself, as I did many times that day, because Caryn wanted a natural birth. After hearing all of this information, we had to fill out little cards about our “birthing intentions.” All the women around us were getting the drugs. Only our Jewish lesbian academic wanted the pain.

Gynophobia

Then we all got to practice blowing. Now mind you, I’m a big fan of blowing in the right context (yoga, of course), but after we finished our breathing exercises, the nurse asked us to get on the floor and “touch your partner in a way that will make her feel relaxed such as her shoulders, her back, her thighs.” “Her thighs?” I panicked.



Caryn, Gregg, and I have never had a physical relationship, nor did we intend to have one. We had conceived this child in non-sexual love and were rather hoping to birth the child without encountering those parts of the woman that most gay men, and I suspect most men in general, have a slight fear of. And touching her thighs during our mock birth was getting a little too close for my comfort.

Gregg calls it gynophobia, irrational fear of the parts “down there,” but this was childbirth. There was only one place that baby was going to be coming out of, and Gregg and I needed to get used to it. Gregg and I had already been traumatized enough by the birth videos that we were oh-so-fortunate to have watched. Lots of blood, guts, and gore, all from a region I had never really explored before. But this was the birth of my kid, so I did what any good student would do—I studied all of the chambers, tubes, paths, and other places baby would be travelling during show time. And I did what any good daddy would learn to do—appreciate the life-giving power of a woman’s body.

By the end of class, which I must say we passed with flying colors, we learned ways to be physical with Caryn without being sexual (and we hired a doula to do some of the heavy lifting that we weren’t comfortable with), that we were a fish out of water in more ways than one and that was okay, and most important, that no matter how much planning and preparation we did, a few weeks after our class, this baby was going to determine what the show looked like, and that flexibility and patience were going to be the laws of the land. And I got a gold star for asking the best questions.

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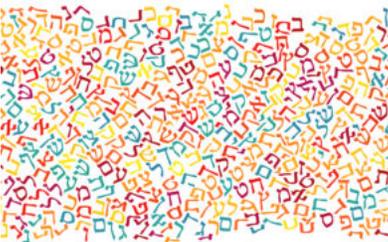
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