

Toldot 5782

Ghosts into Ancestors

Hello, you have reached the Toddler Feelings Helpline. Please choose from the following options:

- If Mama went to the store for a minute but you are pretty sure she's never coming back, please mash all of the keys but mostly 1.
- If you still feel pretty messed up about how they were just going to burn the Velveteen Rabbit, please mash all of the keys but mostly 2.
- If you don't like the way your shirt is right now, please hit a sibling for no reason.
- If you do not like the way your morning toast was prepared, please press 9, and then 1, and then 1, and then hide the phone in a laundry basket.
- If you wanted the green one and not the blue one and now you are inconsolable, please throw the phone through a screen door.
- If you are crying but you don't remember why, please mash 9.¹

We've started with that partly because it has cracked up every parent I've shown it to and we could all use a good laugh – but also because it reminds us just how incredibly hard it is to be a parent.

As a non-parent myself I'm in a state of constant admiration for the parents I meet. If you were told in advance that there was a job opening that required 24/7 availability for an undisclosed period of time from day 1 to the end of your own life, requiring endless patience, creativity, adaptability, love, attention and adjustments to all your other relationships, plus unlimited physical stamina, plus the outlay of an enormous but unquantified sum of money, plus the ability to function while sleep and food-deprived and by the way there's no salary – would you sign up?

So maybe we need to think twice before we judge parents and their parenting.

¹From: The Toddler Feelings Helpline, Sarah Givern, <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/toddler-feelings-helpline>]

On the other hand – that’s hard to do when we look at these early stories of families in the Torah. Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg wryly observed recently, “I would hope we had left any illusions the Torah is a parenting manual by the wayside around Abraham” and we probably did – but still, there are some spectacular parenting fails in these parshiyot we’ve been reading.

- Abraham casts out one of his sons and nearly sacrifices the other.
- Isaac plays favorites, seemingly obsessed with the physicality of Esau, his oldest.
- Jacob will do even worse. Not only does he play favorites with his sons, having apparently learned nothing from his old dad - he sits by when his daughter is violated (that’s one of the stories we don’t learn in Hebrew school).

And then there are the matriarchs. We have to infer more here because the Torah tells us less, but if we look hard enough we can still see:

- Sarah is rigid and controlling
- Rebekah is manipulative and conniving
- Leah is passive, and Rachel is demanding.

And those are just the headlines. One of the challenges of Torah is its brevity. It’s up to us to fill in the blanks – what relationship did Ishmael and Abraham manage to salvage after such a beginning? Did Isaac even acknowledge Jacob’s presence “in the tent” as he waited eagerly for the next meal Esau would bring? Did Leah or Jacob have any kind of relationship at all with their only daughter – did they play hide and seek with her and bounce her on their knees?

It won’t be until the end of the book of Bereishit that we will find two children who seem to make it to adulthood unscathed by their parenting. Perhaps that’s why parents bless their sons that they will grow up like Ephraim and Menashe.

But that begs the question: why, then, do we bless our daughters that they grow up like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah? And why do we give prominence to both the patriarchs and the matriarchs three times a day, every day, in the first paragraph of the Amidah?

A couple of weeks ago I heard an answer that’s stayed with me.

Former President Barack Obama and rock musician (okay, rock legend) Bruce Springsteen have made a podcast. It's called *Renegades: Born in the USA*² and it grew out of a series of conversations they had about their love of America and their concern over its divisions. They talk about their lives and their purpose, they talk about music, they run away from the Secret Service to catch a ride in Bruce's car with the top down. And they talk, too, about their fathers and their relationships with them, and how that shaped their idea of what it means to be a man. These are intimate conversations - the episode that follows the one about their fathers is one in which they discuss their own experience of what it's like to be a father themselves. That's the idea of *toldot*, the title of today's parashah - what you receive and what you hand down yourself. The word also means 'consequences.'

Somewhere in that first episode, the one about their own fathers, Springsteen declares, "we have to turn our ghosts into our ancestors."

And that's the answer to the question of how we bless our daughters and why our Amidah is the way it is. Our tradition reminds us that we must take the unpromising, traumatic material of all those parenting failures and turn the memories that haunt us into something that can inspire us, walk with us and companion us beyond the boundaries of an ordinary human life, a strength we can draw on when our own lives become hard.

That work of turning ghosts into ancestors is part of what it means to be human. A human being. Everyone does that work in a different way. Sometimes it can require a conversation. Sometimes we're able to forgive. Sometimes we can even laugh and produce pieces like the Toddler Feelings Helpline. And sometimes we have to pick among ruins to see what is salvageable. It's demanding work. It can be messy.

But if we can do it well, if we can turn our ghosts into our ancestors, then when it comes to our own *toldot*, our own legacy - well, then, we will have something to leave behind as we become ancestors in our turn.

² <https://open.spotify.com/show/42xagXCUDsFO6a0lcHoTlv> - it also comes as a book.