

Traveling with Children

Mothering and the Ethics of the Ordinary World

Laurie Zoloth-Dorfman

Making Reservations: The Journey as Leavetaking

Here is the picture of the seeker on the spiritual path. A person walks alone, the way is difficult, the terrain dramatic. Without knowing the gender of the person depicted by the text, do we have any doubt that the seeker is male?

Here is the National Geographic T.V. special on world religions: In a distant mountain country, there is a month-long celebration. The film depicts a crowd praying and singing in celebration. Is it a surprise to us when the close-up shows us that the crowd lost in ecstatic contemplation is entirely male?

A Jewish example: Jacob on the road, as understood by the Zohar.
Jacob descended to her,
went straight to her abode,
as it is said:
"and he set out for Haran."
He saw all the trappings of her house
and was saved from her.
"And a man wrestled with him. . . ." (Genesis 32:25)
Now he was saved and perfected,
raised to a perfect sphere and called Israel.
He attained a high rung, total perfection!
He became the central pillar. . . .

Such texts always leave me muttering about who is watching the four-year-olds near the water, who is bouncing the babies to sleep at the edges of the gathering, who is washing the plates after dinner, who is dying the cloth for the sacred raiment. The work that must support the quest is invisible. And the oldest construct in theology and philosophy is this very invisibility. Yet for women it is this work that frames the world and the critical struggle to find moral meaning, especially in light of the starkness of the absence of this feminist perspective in traditional text.

The spiritual quest is written as a quest away—a

journey away from the ordinary to the sacred, away from the demands of the daily to the purity of the holy. Yet in the struggle to encounter what God wants of us, I must find meaning, holiness in this life. It cannot mean that God wants flight from what I can know as most holy—the birth and breath of my children.

Judaism has been criticized with extraordinary vigor for the lack of attention to the female voice in the text, and this critique is justified. The challenge, then, is to construct an ethics of ordinariness without sentimentality about the daily moral choices that are made by women and to reflect on the theology that is partner to such an ethics. In this construct the notions of ethics and spirituality are inseparable, neither possible without the light of the other.

We are drawn into the process of public discourse by the sensational acts at the outskirts of human community: the pregnancies by radical technology, the rescue of the particular child. Yet the daily acts of choice that thousands of women make, and see as choices of faith, are far more difficult. What would the shape of ethics or spirituality be if we focused on the ethics and theology of the moral gesture of raising children who are in our lives and through whom we carry the obligation to the past and the next generation?

This article began as a conversation with colleagues, feminist scholars of religion and ethics, about why we couldn't seem to get our articles in on time. It was all the interruption! The chicken pox! The field trip! And here we were, trying to write important things about The Good, each of us balancing the teaching and creation of theological reflection with the teaching and the creation of the babies and children who we mother. Usually, this second work is seen as that distraction that takes us from the rigor of the first. The parallel universe of the mundane is the messy, tangible, and embodied that surrounds all of our theory. Yet, on personal reflection, it turns out that it is the deep passion of mothering that enlivens our disparate faith journeys.

What is at stake in this argument is not the simple

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recognition that the work of the female role needs to be honored or seen, although this has been a key feminist insight. What is at stake, rather, is the claim that the paradigm of the faith journey as usually envisioned—a separate, singular quest for growing self-actualization—is just not the one that describes an accurate story of women’s lives. The very notion of spirituality as other-worldliness, as taking place outside the home, understood as a leavetaking from family, as rooted in autonomous journey, is a different vision than the one that we carry in our daily lives. But there is a countervailing notion: that it is the bonds of obligation, found within the family, and within the ordinary, that generate the renewal of daily meaning. What morally matters can be precisely the necessity for daily practice—practice that our culture usually defines only as constraining.

The methodology of feminism insists on the honor and dignity of lived experience, and on the transparency, or self-awareness, of the act of teaching. The slogan that the personal is political is a way of saying that every aspect of one’s life counts in the public arena, that every choice is a public, moral choice. So the alternatively lyric and difficult quality of our family commitments ought to inform our teaching, and in fact all of our work at the most basic level. Yet, (and simultaneously,) the imperative of feminism demands an attention to the liberation of the female self from the constraints of the female role and demands of us a radical rethinking of the nature of obligation and dependency.

Are these two ideological calls hopelessly at odds with one another? In what way is the ordinary choice to have children a feminist choice? An essential Jewish choice (and what kind of Jewish choice?) A generally expressed religious choice? What are we to make of the different ways we experience our obligations toward the dependent young in our families (perhaps chosen) and the dependent old (perhaps not chosen)? For my colleagues in religious ethics, how we know and how we teach the text of faith depends on how we apprehend this answer. And for each of us, how we think about spirituality and about the moral life will be constructed by the choices we make about these questions.

I do not mean to heroicize mothering uncritically: The family is complex, both liberatory and conservative. Chicken pox happens, and much, much worse. The ordinary difficult obligations, dependency, tragic loss, and tragic angers are often precisely what people want sacred refuge from. But I want to turn us back into the place of secular, mundane time, into regular and familiar moral choices. It is precisely in these smaller heroic acts that we need to construct an ethics of the larger public sphere.

Here then are notes toward such an ethics. They are

draft notes, of course, because I have five children. I have stopped again and again in the very writing of this paper to nurse the baby, to fill my arms with her, to open to her. In the breathing darkness that follows her cry, I lay still, and think of the next thing to tell you.

Short Day Hikes: The Theology of the Interruption, the Ethics of Encounter

The value of interruption is extraordinarily difficult to discern. At academic conferences and religious events you can see the parents: They sit near the door. The liminality of the parental role offers a perspective that is rare: here, the narrative is interrupted by the necessity. Whatever it is that is so pressing in the world, of commerce, of the productive, of the marketplace, (and here I mean the production of ideas just as surely as Adam Smith meant pencils,) is interrupted by the call of the mundane. The structure of the workplace, the academy, even the feminist academy has not supported this aspect of the journey. It is hard to see the interrupted life as having anything but a negative impact on one’s professional life, even my religious scholarship, however fulfilling it might be in one’s faith quest.

My children become a sort of private pleasure, seen as an activity one does in one’s free time. The notion that children are an idiosyncratic hobby is reified by the exclusion not only of children, but of all of the activities that surround childrearing, from real adult life—even or most especially at political or religious conferences, for example. I do not believe that children have to be biologically related to you. It is just rare, but not, of course, impossible for others to make such a commitment without the bounds of parentage, interestingly enough. One can choose to “have” or not “have” children in one’s life as though one were dealing with any other commodity: Will what I get as benefit outweigh the burdens? Such is the template for the autonomous choice of all informed-consent relationships based on the contractual model, a business deal rather than a familial bond.

To reorganize our priorities theologically creates the possibility for social reorganization as well. Could we see the moral decision to mother as an ethical choice, the ordinary act as the faith commitment? Let me make clear that by this I mean something more complex and freighted than the usual equal-rights demand for shared housework, or child care, although Lord knows that simple act would be a perfectly achievable blessing. The ontological status of my life is constructed around the interruption, which is to say that the interruption creates a foundational pattern for the radical recognition

that the needs of the other compel immediate moral attention. Because this moment of encounter is so rarely available to us in the official religious canon, but such a commonplace in the actual world, to speak of it is to remember the power of the daily in ethical choice.

Check Your Guidebook: The Particularity of the Religious Tradition

Is such a claim Jewish? I have argued in these pages (See "Reading and Reading Ruth," *TIKKUN*, May/June 1995) that a moment of such radical recognition occurs in the Book of Ruth. One can find this encounter repeated in other critical biblical texts. I would argue that rabbinic texts construct and reflect a culture that is cognizant of this: Much of the religious honor given to the daily reflects a choice that we can claim as feminist. The attention to the details of the work of a human life, the concern with the work of childbearing, of reproduction remind us of a rabbinic regard that is a deliberate theological decision about power and importance.

To live an interrupted life means a recognition of the theological importance of the element of surprise. If nothing you are saying is sacred (i. e., uninteruptable), then it is the whole of the human life that becomes sacred, rather than isolate, special moments of the life. If the heroism, the nobility of the moment is interrupted, than the interruption becomes a comment on the text of the gesture itself.

The notion of the heroic is deconstructed, literally, by the call of the child. In form as well as content, the text of the Talmud attests to and mirrors this experience. The argumentative form, the conversation in the familiar replicates this aspect of conversational ethical encounter. Talmudic discourse and text allows the creation of a community of shared meaning, interrupted by the case and the casuistic reflection that both offers and comments on a model of the interrupted discourse for ethical reflection.

Overnights: the Meaning of Everlastingness

Life long commitments to one's children are often experienced as among the few life long relationships available in America. Parenting is an ethical stand, not to be ignored, a recognition that despite convenience, or feeling state, one is in a relationship that is permanent. To speak of this openly is a problematic discussion for feminism. For many, myself included, the

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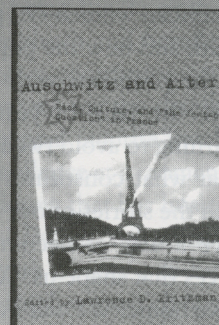
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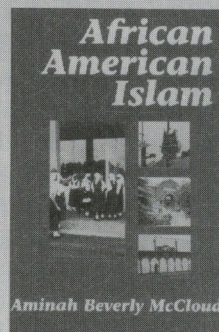


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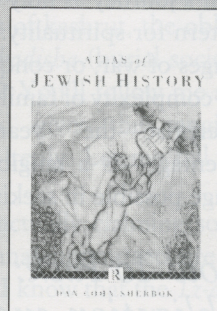
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ability to choose not to conceive children became historically linked with the feminist cause. The right to control reproduction for many women offered a moment in American history that was unbounded: a life directed not only toward liberty but liberated from historical compulsions and physical constraints.

The popular imagination has fixed on this image, and it certainly was a revolutionary change in the status of women. Yet, two decades later, it is still true that most American women (90 percent) have responsibility for a child, and now the popular press is filled with accounts of the problems with deferring the childbearing decision, the pain of yearning for the children we were yearning to avoid twenty-five years ago. It is now not so clear what constitutes liberation. But we have learned with the stories of our own lives that temporary choices have a way of becoming the immutable gravitational forces that shape us. We are learning it is not so easy to leave home. We will live with our own youth: our rebellion, our insights, our discoveries, as we age, as we are needed by others, and as we need others.

To speak of a theology of parenting is to speak of a theology of permanence. This is even truer in regard to parental responsibility, to daughtering, the inescapable commitment. To speak of an ethical construction based in the mirror of a biological bond is not to be collapsed into a sort of natural law ("learn modesty from the cat"). It is abundantly clear that the strongly pronatalist assumptions in Talmudic and prophetic texts are meant as liberatory and not as survivalist. In other words, the blessing of children is revealed by all that we learn from the texts to be central, in fact to be what frees us from the merely mortal, the limits of the inevitability of biology.

Hannah's quest for a son is seen as a spiritual act. The central drama of *Beresbit*, the Book of Genesis, is the drama of the promise of fecundity. The story of this drama is, of course, a mirror of the deep spiritual adventure of pregnancy and childbirth itself. To tell of such a journey as holy creates an alternative organizing pattern for spirituality: a language that is not based on images of war, or conquest, or singular remove, but on the complexity of family. The focus of the Torah on this enterprise—the yearning for pregnancy and parentage—is a tangible mark of the alternative language possible in seeking an ethics of the daily.

How To Pack: The Nature of Obligation and the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven

To live as a parent is to live burdened, carrying. In the backpack of the seeker is food enough for many. Let us

return for a moment to the Jacob story. Despite the Zohar's portrayal of Jacob as alone, he is the most burdened of men. Traveling with family, the Patriarchs and Matriarchs course from place to place, traveling, as Christian theologian Bonnie C. Miller-McLemore points out, at the slow pace of children. Yet we do not have the story of the women the night of Jacob's struggle, there is no account of their journey to the Land, choosing husband over mother and father and home, how that wrestling might have renamed them, what it must have meant to them.

The Exodus journey itself, the central metaphor of the spiritual journey of the Jew, is undertaken amid the cries of children, the clouds of dust from the hooves of the animals, carrying everything you own on your back, carrying what your children need, holding the baby at Sinai (somebody has to). To be burdened is to live a commanded and obligational life. To be burdened, to have work and to understand that the details of how you do the work makes a difference in God's universe is the claim of the rabbinic system of the commanded life.

Hence the system of *mitzvot* is itself a critique of the notion of autonomy, if autonomy is understood as the possession of individual rights to a locale of utter freedom, to an individual sphere that is inviolate. In the place of this sort of autonomy, I have argued for a particular relationality, one in which the voice of the other is heard as one's own. This is the pattern of parenting that is available to us as an ethical choice if we understand the other as fundamental to one's social and spiritual survival.

To be born into the world free of all association except voluntarily chosen ones is the promise of the Enlightenment, but it is not reflective of the lived experience of women. For parents, primarily women in our culture, one is born into a complex web of obligation, promises, and commitments, and there is no easy escape from this that does not look like abandonment. Dependability, the ability to depend on the other, to see his or her cause as your cause—all of this is what is central to the ethical encounter.

Learning the Language of the Country

Revising the language of moral discourse is only possible when there is a moment that strips language from the usual syntactical frame. Nothing arranges this more totally than the deconstruction of the given by the project of the acquisition of language itself. Teaching a child to speak enlivens the construction of theology in this way, reorganizing sentence, form, and content. But even more important in a reconstruction of ethics is the teaching of right and wrong. As Selya Benahib, a philoso-

pher of the communicative school of ethics, remarks: The way one can think of ethics is as a conversation in which you explain to your six-year-old why it is that she cannot make an exception of herself. The language of an ethics of the daily is ordinary talk, a language that deconstructs the philosophical and theological texts themselves.

Common Mistakes All Travelers Make: Loss, Error, and Mortality

When my last child was born, it was weeks before I could comfortably bear to have another person hold her. It was, I explained to myself, as if they were holding a piece of my body, some internal organ, my heart, my liver, something that was flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone taken from my side, warm with my own heat, carried around outside my body. What is at stake is death, and the urgency of this recognition is both made sharper by childbirth and made curiously more comforting. When I die, this next one will live after. My death is as certain as her inexorable birth. Mortality itself becomes more vivid with childbirth and childrearing, and the passage of time not an abstraction, but as a linear progression with an inevitable end. The edges of stamina, the limits of reproduction all remind us of an embodied facticity. This is the large truth we flee from at great cost.

Thinking through the body and thinking through the text of one's life require an attention to the texture and the detail. Judaism, as I struggle to practice it, is a dis-course of daily life, the ordinary heroics of mothering as the reference for my approach to any biblical narrative. (This is how I know the deep trouble of the Sarah story, the grief of Hagar, the panic of Rachel.)

In all my thinking about spirituality, I want to honor the blinding and ecstatic moment of the journey, the faith of pregnancy, the enormity of childbirth itself. Look here in any ordinary life: Just beneath the casual course of things lives the clearest print of the divine. To speak of the spiritual journey is to claim this, to mark this as ethics is to seize a larger stake still: parenting can be seen as a miracle as surely as the answer to the slave's call. To bear children, and then to walk on the way, bearing children, is to be asked and answered. It is the moment in the faith journey that is the most profoundly ethical, the oath that cannot be capricious, whose coming into being teaches both the merits and the gifts of the human life.

Keep a Record of your Trip

Looking for supportive depictions of such a journey is discouraging. The *Tanach* offers complex portrayals of Matriarchs, of course, and the few narratives have

been reclaimed critically in many other contexts. In fact, the reconstructions of the female journey of faith act as a mirror for what it is we are thinking culturally about what women ought to be doing, and since what women in most historical contexts ought to be doing is childrearing, these texts are given back to us in terms of their normative take-home (literally) message.

There is a literature of assent that is interesting in this context, the classic of the genre being the *Tz-enah Ur-enah*, the Yiddish collection of midrash and homiletics intended to be read by women as a companion to the Torah reading in synagogue. Here we see the details as given to women to learn. My personal favorite involves the midrash that answers Esther's silence at a moment in the text. How come she doesn't know that her husband is planning to kill all her relatives? Esther is cleaning the house for Pesach, says the *Tz-enah Ur-enah*, so busily that she misses the edict against the Jews, which is why Mordecai has to come to tell her what to do.

The *Tz-enah Ur-enah* reads the silence of the text of women's gestures with a curious partisanship, finding in the unsaid moment of the biblical story the explanation of cryptic actions. When I studied the Book of Ruth, I noted how the *Tz-enah Ur-enah* read Naomi's silence toward Ruth into words by offering a midrash to put explanatory speech into her mouth. Naomi answers Ruth's prophetic promise on the road to Bethlehem with the mundane details of the ordinary life of a Jew.

I did not write about this when I wrote about the theology of the story, but now I think I might have missed the point. When I footnoted the midrash, which is to say myself silenced or bracketed out of the conversation the response of daily necessity, I too had left out of my theological description the conversation that the *Tz-enah Ur-enah* thought central. But an attention to Naomi is critical, not amusing. This is more than a funny story, removed from the splendid God-talk of Ruth's promise. Naomi replies to Ruth's claim with the realpolitik of the daily: the laws of kashrut, the obligation to the rules of the *chevra kadisha* (burial society). Death? Lodging? You love me? You'll follow me anywhere?, answers Naomi, and gives the tangible, embodied, ironically, freighted reply: Let me tell you the specifics. Carry this.

This midrashic literature is actually claiming something remarkable: that simple unassuming acts are not apology but are consequential. I know that the *Tz-enah Ur-enah* was not written by a woman, and that the intent of such literature was to create an easy entrance into the complexities of the Torah, and that most of the homiletic moralisms are intended to show that the

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Matriarchs were good Jewish wives. But I am suggesting here that we can reclaim such pacification texts themselves as locations for a feminist ethics that takes account of the ordinary: a risky choice methodologically. This is not some organizing tool (although it is critical to imagine a feminist theory that is politically useful and usefully accessible).

Gestures of the daily are prophetic, not because that is all that women have, although this may have been also true, but because theologically the moral gesture of the

ONE-ON-ONE

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price paid for such deferred lives, for any parent, could never seem a fair one.

And there was something else. I had often—as in the writing of this essay—taken great pleasure in being able to say: “I’m a single parent raising three children by myself.” When I said it, I knew, I had done so with a pride not unlike the pride I felt when talking about scoring a key basket, or winning a tennis match. Though I often regretted not having a spouse to help me raise my children (more for their sake than for mine), I knew, too, that I sometimes loved the fact of raising them myself as much as I loved raising them, that I loved not having to consult or confer with anyone else about them, and that—a determined, competitive American man to the bone—I loved, simply, being able (most of the time) to have things *my* way.

I may have lost to my son in a game of one-on-one, but his mother, by not having known her children, day by day,

PANTHER

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for his ads to denounce this movie than our distribution company had to advertise it. The media was anxious to “dis” the movie, given the right-wing mood swing at the moment in the country and the desire of the media to seem responsive to that mood.

But I’m not surprised at this. I’m not in business to make money. What America is seeing right now are light comedies. It’s like the Depression era. People are not wanting to see *Grapes of Wrath*, they want something to cheer them up, and so I can’t credit Horowitz with defeating this movie, because it’s the nature of this period not to want to respond to this kind of serious movie that makes people rethink their world.

What was surprising was that usually when people take

daily heroic act makes possible sacred acts in ordinary time and space. Why Naomi’s response, or Esther’s house cleaning are key moments of spirituality is the regard that such recognition affords us, the reader with the baby in her arms. It is the design, the warp and weave of the world that is honored, a recognition that the spiritual journey begins again each morning, like bed-making or breakfast, work that is undone by the simplest act of turning in the night, by our own new hunger, like the milk in my breast again, waiting for the baby’s cry. □

through the formative years of their lives, had surely wound up losing bigger. Although, for a dozen years, I had fought and won, mostly, for my children—to get them through while earning the trust and affection I hoped would be ours for the rest of our lives—I had, I knew, in the part of me that remained bitter and embattled against their mother, won for myself too, and this victory, despite its sad edge, had often been precious to me.

I was able, then, to return to Northampton without the fears that had, for a brief period, plagued me, not so much because I’d been in touch with my womanly nature, but because before, during, and after this might have occurred, I’d been quite deeply in touch with my life as a middle-class American man. I was, by virtue of this fact, well practiced at knowing how to accept any responsibilities that came my way, how to persist and to succeed and to win—for myself, as well as with and for my children—at most jobs to which I set my mind, heart, and will. □

out an ad to critique a movie it is because they are feeling attacked. Asian Americans might take out an ad to critique a movie that has a negative portrayal of their community, or other ethnic groups might do that. But here was a white guy taking out an ad to say, “I don’t like how you Blacks see yourselves.” That’s a real leap. And he talks about the killing of someone in 1974 by some people associated with the Panthers, but our movie ends in 1969.

USA Today interviewed David Hilliard and Elaine Brown, who liked the movie, and also Bobby Seale (who is making his own movie on the Panthers), and David Horowitz, who didn’t like the movie, and then it only quoted the people who were negative. They put their negative assessment on the front page. But this wasn’t the main problem. The main problem is that today Americans want to see light fare. □