

Parashat Vayishlach

Deena Has Four Mommies: Tales of Co-parenting in TaNaCh

by Miryam Kabakov on Saturday November 20, 2010

13 Kislev 5771

Genesis 32:4 - 36:43

Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by four hundred men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maids, putting the maids and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last (Gen. 33:1-2).

The passage from this week's Parsha gives us a picture of a complicated family. If you think you have a complex living arrangement, look at Deena's home. There are four mothers, one father, and twelve half- or full biological siblings. In this family, there was surely a lot of *de facto* co-parenting going on and today might be considered "alternative." If it does take a village, this family has it made in the shade. But at the same time, it seems as if the matriarchs and patriarchs are in the dark about how to navigate family dynamics. Their lives are fraught with jealousy, deceit and one-upmanship. Rachel and Leah treat having children as a race to the finish. Yaakov's hierarchical ranking of the mothers of his children doesn't help: as the passage above makes clear, Yaakov is intentional in the placement of his family members as he readies himself to greet his long lost brother Esav. With vivid memories of Esav as a bloodthirsty hunter and fighter bent on revenge, Yaakov splits his camp. The reasoning is that if Esav does attack, at least half will survive.

On Gen 33:2, explaining why Yaakov puts the "maids" (Bilha and Zilpa) and their children first, Leah and hers second and Rachel with Yosef in back, Rashi states, simply: *aharon aharon chaviv*: the last is the dearest. The sentiment behind this brief statement is made explicit in Ibn Ezra's comment on the same verse: "Because of his love for them, he placed Rachel and Yosef last, lest they be killed." Those on the front lines will be the first in harm's way; those in the rear will be protected. The order says it all: Yaakov loves Rachel and Yosef best, and he is willing to expose his other wives and children to danger to save his favorites.

Even without Yaakov's preferential treatment, however, the dynamics are complicated. The co-mothering arrangement is fraught with competition and with questions of whose descendants will ultimately prevail. The mothers are building a nation, but building is never a simple task, and construction sites are messy. According to the Midrash, Rachel and Leah love each other and show kindness to each other before children come into the picture. Even under the strain

of vying for the same man, they take care of one another. But as co-mothers, difficulties arise. Leah easily conceives, but Rachel is initially barren. Rachel then uses her maid Bilha as a surrogate. By giving birth while leaning on Rachel's knees, Bilha delivers Dan, the son Rachel claims and names as her firstborn. Bilha also delivers Rachel's second son, Naftali. His very name bespeaks the competition between the sisters: "A fateful contest I waged with my sister; yes, and I have prevailed."

Queer parenting couples may find this situation more familiar than is entirely comfortable. Some of us, perhaps many of us, find ourselves in relationships of competition as well as love with our partners. "Competitive mothering," a term coined by Deborah Glazer, describes a common phenomenon among same-sex partners. Glazer writes: "For lesbians who are co-parenting...issues regarding competition can be a likely source of distress." This is not something we talk about openly. We feel shame when our beloved partners become our competitors. We may fear that this is unique to same-sex couples, in which it takes more work to differentiate our ways of being mother or being father with another one of the same. The real difficulties of parenting, and especially parenting in same-sex couples, can be not only a source of shame but also a disappointment: some of us enter into these partnerships hoping, and expecting, that we can create little utopian oases in our society.

I want to name the reality of jealousy and competition because if we push through it, and name it, we may be able to get to our dream of what we hope and want our families to look like. Similar to many same-sex parenting couples, Rachel and Leah experience a form of competitive mothering. We cannot find utopia within their family structure. For the utopian dream to actualize itself in co-mothering, one must fast forward to the story of Ruth and Naomi. In this story, the bond between Naomi and Ruth seems to transcend blood ties. Ruth convinces her bereft mother-in-law that she loves her, and that her love exists independently of all kinship ties. Naomi cannot understand this. In her own view, she has nothing to offer Ruth; no sons, no promise of progeny, no blood relation. Ruth, famously, persists, determined to follow and "cleave" to Naomi (Ruth 1:14-17). Eventually Naomi orchestrates the scene that will lead to the marriage of Ruth and Boaz. Ruth bears a son, Oved, through her union with Boaz. Naomi is the first to hold this baby, and a Greek chorus of village women recognize the baby as the child of Ruth and Naomi: "A son is born to Naomi," they proclaim (Ruth 4:17). The language of the text goes on, "Naomi took the child and held him to her breast, and she became his omenet." The omenet is the nursing mother, the foster mother, or, we might say, the co-mother. The end result of the love between Ruth and Naomi is a co-mothering. Oved is a descendent of Naomi, even though his biological parents are Boaz and Ruth.

I see in the relationship between Rachel and Leah the hard dynamics of strife, jealousy, and competition, and I look to Ruth and Naomi as the portrait of harmonious, even utopian same-sex co-parenting. But the townspeople in the Book of Ruth see things differently. They trace



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

www.keshetonline.org

one continuous line from the imahot to the utopian love of their contemporaries, Ruth and Naomi. When they give Boaz a blessing they say: “May [Ruth] be like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up (banu) the house of Israel.” The villagers acknowledge Rachel and Leah as the builders of Israel. They give credit where credit is due: Rachel and Leah paved the way. The work of the imahot was even more strenuous: they dug the path, broke up the earth, and then built (banu) the way. The first family of the nation of Israel is not remembered for its messiness, in-fighting, or jealousies. Rachel and Leah are lovingly recalled, in this moment, as the first women who had the courage to slog out the work of co-mothering, and who achieved something great by doing so.

We today are part of the first few generations to intentionally raise children in families headed by same-sex couples. It’s new, and it’s difficult. There’s not a lot of guidance out there. We are creating family structures that we most likely did not ourselves grow up in. We are Rachel and Leah, doing the hard work of building a new sort of family. But I believe we are heading toward the ideal of Ruth and Naomi.

I would like to make a call for being open about the messiness and complications of our own families, and the challenges that come with donor sperm, donor egg, biological mothers, birth families, surrogate families, third and fourth parents, and everything else of which our families consist. We navigate the difficulties in our under-construction families as we strive for utopia. I say, wear a hard hat. It may be easier to create a utopian vision than have to imagine the road map of a road never taken. But both are necessary. The result? Oved is the father Yishai, who is the father of David, whose descendents will give birth to the moshiach. Ruth and Naomi’s love for each other, a love that transcends blood ties, is the utopian dream of harmonious and peaceful co-mothering; it is also, we learn, a love that brings the Messiah.



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

www.keshetonline.org