

On Parenthood: Presence as Prayer

In *Nurture the Wow* (Flatiron, \$24.99), Danya Ruttenberg finds spirituality in the “frustration, boredom, tears, poop, desperation, wonder, and radical amazement of parenting”—to quote the book’s subtitle. She explores how parenting, and mothering in particular, can awaken a sense of wonder at the miracles of the world and attune us to the infinite. Drawing on an impressively diverse group of thinkers, from Abraham Joshua Heschel and Abraham Kook to monks and oblates to her own friends and acquaintances, Ruttenberg also marshals her own experiences as the mother of two toddler boys (and an infant girl, though she was born once the book had been completed) to link everyday experiences to moments of transcendence. For instance, waking up with a sick child at night inspires her to contemplate the notion of “presence as prayer”—that sometimes just being there for a child may constitute an act of sacred devotion. Likewise, she encourages parents to regard the acts of love and service performed for children as sacrificial offerings, which she compares to the sacrifices offered in the Temple.

Ruttenberg is an ordained rabbi who is well-versed in Jewish sources. At the same time, she writes openly of her adolescent atheism and her struggles with prayer even after her rabbinic ordination. She explains how, even though becoming a parent made it harder for her to remain committed to a regular prayer practice, it was the “relentless physicality” of childbirth and nursing that enabled her to inhabit her body and appreciate the “holy entanglement” between mother and child. She

movingly explores the spiritual implications of the embodied nature of our love for our children, whose noses and bottoms we wipe and who nestle in the crooks of our arms.

Not surprisingly given Ruttenberg’s own stage of life, many of her examples involve toddler tantrums, the construction of Lego houses, and arguments with picky eaters. While her message is relevant to parents of all faiths and at all stages of parenting, her anecdotes will perhaps reso-

nate most with parents of young boys, like herself, not those dealing with schoolgirls’ catfights or teenagers’ testing of limits. It is also worth noting that she writes for parents of normal, healthy kids—parents who are kept awake at night because of their children’s nightmares, or because they are breastfeeding a newborn. Absent from her chapter on prayer was any mention of what it feels like to pray as a panicked parent in a doctor’s office or a hospital waiting room. When Ruttenberg cries out to God, “Help me,” it is because she is exhausted after cleaning up her son’s vomit in the middle of the night while her husband is away on a business trip. In response, I could not help but offer a prayer of my own, as a reader and as a mother: Please, God, may that be as hard as it ever gets.

Still, Ruttenberg has much to offer, particularly to new mothers bewil-

dered by the loss of self that so often accompanies those early stages of nurturing and caregiving. She shows how understanding a newborn’s nonverbal communication can attune parents to the divine, and how a young child’s fascination with the ordinary can awaken a parent’s sense of wonder. In a moving and insightful final chapter, about parenting as a mystical experience, she wonders whether the experience of intimate connection with children can be thought of a sort of mysti-

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cal connection in its own right, or at least as a way of expanding our own set of metaphors for mystical encounter: “If Torah speaks in the language of human beings, it’s also true that human beings expand our sense of Torah—of the holy, of the possible.” Ruttenberg explores the metaphorical possibilities that parenthood has inspired in her—both ways that she has reread the tradition, and breathed new life into it. Her book is expansive in the way that parenthood is expansive—leading us beyond ourselves and into the realm of the divine, or at least into the marvel of the more empathic and generous human beings we might become.

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Poverty, Ethnicity, Sexuality and Class

In 1917, 18-year-old Beatrice Haven sneaks into her uncle’s pear orchard and leaves her newborn daughter to be raised by the band of thieves who come each

