

Haaretz

## Bringing Up Babies

Journalists Raanan Shaked and Orna Coussin have both written thought-provoking and touching books on parenthood using the diary genre



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"Taggid Abba" ("Say Daddy" ) by Raanan Shaked, Yedioth Books, 178 pages, NIS 98

"Effess ad 12" ("Zero to 12" ) by Orna Coussin, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 176 pages, NIS 82

When my partner and I were recently asked on some questionnaire when our 4-year-old first started to turn over, crawl, walk and speak, we were embarrassed to discover we could not remember. What do we remember from the first year of our child's life? For me - and for many other parents, too, I imagine - these are moments that are all overshadowed by exhaustion, which turns them into a single blur.

Raising children inevitably entails repressing everything that happened in an earlier stage. The birth? What a mistake I made when I took an epidural, I realize now; I could have done it without one (had they hospitalized me in an isolated cell with no nurses whom I could grab, while screaming: "Give me an epidural - now!" ). Someone's baby isn't crawling at eight months? Well, our son didn't either (and we barely managed to function, we were so anxious ).

The books by Raanan Shaked and Orna Coussin, written a year apart, document the first year of their children's lives and try to do the impossible: extract a narrative from utter

chaos. This is facilitated partly by the genre they use - a diary, with entries that are recorded regularly. Through this means, the two create a piece of personal history and offer a description of their developing relationships with their newborns, their partners and themselves.

At the same time, however, the diary also constitutes a document with social and ideological value: It records an era in which the patriarchal family seems to have been severely damaged around the world, in general. Both Shaked and Coussin seem to embody this era. Coussin is not a biological mother; her partner is. But she writes that she has been "privileged to observe motherhood and parenthood up close." Shaked, for his part, has been denied the privileges of being the old-time, traditional father who, he writes, "can come home from work late, play with the child for 10 minutes and go watch the news." Both books thus deal intensively with how a "non-mother" and a father relate to their children.

As a biological mother myself, I found this very discussion fascinating and thought-provoking, particularly in the case of Shaked's monologue, in which he says he fears he will not be able to have a good father-child relationship as someone who himself grew up without a father and therefore never felt part of "the men's club."

I imagine any parent could identify with the anxiety Shaked expresses so very directly and precisely - that his son will not pass certain, cruel masculinity tests that little boys begin facing by age 3 or 4. Even in my son's kindergarten, ostensibly a bastion of progressive and enlightened Tel Avivism, the most awful insult for a boy is "You look / talk / dress like a girl." I have had trouble explaining just how evil this insult is to my son, despite my progressive approach to gender education.

In light of this, it is disappointing to find that Shaked clings to a rather cracked image of the "old-style" male, repeatedly stressing how hard it is for him, as a man, to devote himself to the everyday aspects of parenthood - the frequent nighttime wake-ups; the feedings; the difficulty created by what he refers to as "innate" differences between the sexes ("Men don't really understand babies," "For women, bringing up children is easy" ).

Coussin, however, describes both psychological and physical bodily experiences. Everything Shaked covers up, she reveals: the contents of the diapers, the nursing and spitting up, the arguments between the parents and even the sex (when the baby finally falls asleep for a few minutes ). Coussin describes all of this with strong emotional involvement, reflecting not only love and joy, but also more complex feelings, such as those concerning her place in her daughter's life, or the insecurity and envy she feels toward a little boy whom her daughter particularly likes.

It is tempting to argue that the differences in the two writers' emotional involvement is due to gender; further proof that women connect to children in a more "primal" and "instinctive" way. Yet I know many women who could identify with Shaked's anxieties. In fact, it seems to me that what differentiates the two books ultimately is related to writing, not gender. Both Shaked and Coussin are esteemed journalists who at a certain stage turned to other kinds of writing. While Coussin transitioned into literary prose - a difficult journey, even for talented writers - Shaked still presents himself as a journalist. His book consists of several of his columns in Yedioth Aharonth's weekly magazine Seven Days. It seems he is not trying to distinguish between his journalistic and literary writing; he uses the same tools in both - humor, but no subtexts. Some of the articles are

amusing, and even touching, but the sense is that no special thought or effort were invested to transform the newspaper items into a real literary text.

Coussin's book, by contrast, explicitly and consciously tries to draw its strength from the literary genre of the diary. Her writing style both reveals and conceals things. It is direct but devoid of sentimentality; it is realistic but often contains echoes of poetry, prose and even nonfiction. It fits the literary-intellectual diary genre perfectly, as it was in the pre-blog era. Though her book is divided into chapters in accordance with Coussin's daughter's development ("Crying," "Smiling," "Sitting" and so on), the chapters give rise not only to an emotional experience, but also an artistic-literary one, for the reader. Maybe this experience should not be recommended to those of delicate constitution, who may be shocked when they read how Coussin suckles from her partner's breasts in order to see whether she is producing too much milk, or how the baby empties her bowels on the writer.

Nevertheless, there is a lot of power in this writing which, in my opinion, comes from the very possibility that Coussin presents to her readers: the possibility of experiencing the chaos, the fractures and the impossible paradoxes that fill our lives the moment we become parents - not in the sense of a sacred obligation that must be fulfilled, but rather as the result of complete devotion to a new love, out of free will.

This new love is perhaps directed above all to the newborn, who is experiencing his or her first steps in life - or, more specifically, the first spit-ups. But at the same time, this primal feeling also gives added validity to other kinds of loves - to the renewed love for your partner, your ally in parenthood who is sunk in this chaos just as you are, and maybe also to the love you feel because of being a parent:

tired, frustrated, sometimes full of guilt, yet nevertheless still able to read and sometimes even to write about the experience.