



## SERMON TOL'DOT:<sup>i</sup> ALL THE NICE GIRLS LOVE A SHEPHERD

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 18 November 2023  
*Flora's baby blessing*  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

**1**      *Rebekah loved Jacob best.*<sup>ii</sup> Why, we wonder? The 12th-century French commentator Joseph B'chor Shor<sup>iii</sup> has an answer: *"It is the way of women to care for a man who raises lambs."* In other words, all the nice girls love a shepherd.<sup>iv</sup>

**2**      Leaving aside B'chor Shor's slightly unfortunate stereotyping, it's not difficult to see why a man who raises lambs would be loveable. Instead of going out hunting and killing like his hairy brother, Jacob was well-groomed and spent his time caring for cute fluffy animals.

**3**      In fact, it isn't just men who care for baby sheep who are attractive. Men who care for baby humans, it turns out, have better marriages. According to research by Jennifer F Bonney, a psychology professor in Virginia, *"[m]arital satisfaction [is both] a consequence and a source of fathers' participation in childcare"*.<sup>v</sup>

**4**      Now, traditional Judaism is not geared up for men to be engaged in childcare. Women are exempt from a whole swathe of mitzvot, commandments,<sup>vi</sup> because being obligated by them might interfere with their capacity to carry out childcare.<sup>vii</sup> And while we might view that as a pleasingly liberal concession, in reality it is nothing of the sort: it means that, traditionally, women end up

<sup>i</sup> Genesis 25:19-34

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 25:28

<sup>iii</sup> *Ad loc*

<sup>iv</sup> All the nice girls love a baaaaaaaah.

<sup>v</sup> Jennifer F Bonney *et al*, "A model of fathers' behavioural involvement in child care in dual-earner families", *Journal of Family Psychology* 13 (1999): 403 (cleaned up).

<sup>vi</sup> m.Kiddushin 1:7

<sup>vii</sup> See Igrot Moshe, Orach Chayyim 4:49

impelled to do all the childcare because their husbands aren't given the necessary halachic slack to do so.

5 Similarly, maternity leave is absolutely vital, and how lucky we are to live in a country that makes it a legal right. But without similar provision for long paternity leave, mothers in heterosexual relationships are still going to end up carrying the can and losing months and months of work while they look after their husbands' babies.<sup>viii</sup>

6 But, in the Jewish context, there is one 20th-century responsum<sup>ix</sup> – written by Rabbi Ben-Zion Abba Sha'ul, an Orthodox rabbi but nonetheless very radical in its outlook – which argues that fathers who have childcare responsibilities should be exempt from many commandments as well:

A woman taking care of children, who is busy with this all day ... is completely exempt ... and the same is true for a man if his wife is not at home and he has to take care of the children ... he is exempt ... because he is already engaged in a mitzvah.

The reasoning there is important. He is already engaged in a mitzvah. This is based on a longstanding principle in Jewish law that someone who is actively fulfilling one commandment is excused if they fail to fulfil other commandments at the same time.<sup>x</sup> So, to take the classic example, a Jewish doctor on duty over Yom Kippur need not fast because they are already engaged in the mitzvah of saving life. And a man looking after his children is engaged in a mitzvah, and if that stops him performing other mitzvot – say, going to synagogue to lay tefillin – he is let off. He no longer has any excuse or distraction to free him from his most important responsibility – towards his family.

7 Now, as your rabbi, I'm constantly faced with the dilemma of being 'already engaged in a mitzvah'. When I'm doing a hospital visit I can't be planning a study session. When I'm planning a study session I

<sup>viii</sup> See eg Josie Cox, "Paternity leave: the hidden barriers keeping men at work", BBC News (13 July 2021): <<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210712-paternity-leave-the-hidden-barriers-keeping-men-at-work>>

<sup>ix</sup> Or L'Tziyyon 2:7 fn 24. To be (un)fair, though, the example he gives of when a man might find himself responsible for childcare is, the short period of time while his wife is in hospital giving birth.

<sup>x</sup> b.Sukkah 25a



can't be meeting with new members. When I'm meeting with new members I can't be preparing for services. And when I'm doing any of these things, I can't be looking after Flora and Omri (although Flora did recently come to a meeting of Education Committee, which she found so boring that she slept through the whole thing).

**8** And that's where you come in, all of you. Just as mothers have to be allowed the opportunity to pursue their own life, and their partners have a responsibility to facilitate that, so too, fathers face a balancing act between work and family. And BHPS, to Manuella's and my enormous gratitude, makes it so easy for us to strike that balance.

**9** There are genuinely not many synagogues which would tolerate the rabbi's 2-year-old pottering around the bimah and chatting through the silent prayer. There are not many synagogues which would allow their rabbi to lay down a firm 'no meetings on Monday evenings' rule to allow for family time (and still fewer synagogues that would extend that privilege to rabbi-fathers as well as rabbi-mothers). And there are not many synagogues where members will happily play with the rabbi's toddler to make life that little bit easier for his family.

**10** Those of you who sit near the front and admire Omri's toy cars, pass him rubber ducks and generally make him feel that shul is a fun and welcoming space while I'm able to get on with my job... you are exempting yourselves from full participation in the service, but you do so in order to partake of the greater mitzvah of caring for a child.

**11** So, for my part, I find myself in the position of Rebekah. I love BHPS above other congregations because it is the way of rabbis to care for communities that raise children – and you are helping me to raise mine. It was thanks to your overwhelmingly welcoming attitude to Omri that I feel confident to bring up Flora here, not just here in Brighton but here in this building.

**12** One of my teachers used to joke that rabbis' children, when they meet up, always get on well with each other because they have so much shared trauma. But actually, BHPS's approach to childcare and family life makes the experience of growing up here as a rabbi's child anything but traumatic. On this auspicious occasion – Simchat Flora – Manuella and I thank you, and look forward to you tolerating Flora's toddling around along with Omri in the fulness of time. בן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

