

There is a section in the Rabbinic literature where it is suggested that the whole book of Genesis is unnecessary and that the Torah should have started with “This Month Shall be To You”, Chapter 12 in the book of Exodus, where the Jewish people receive a set of commandments about the celebration of Passover. If the Torah is seen solely as a set of laws, then we can ditch the first fourteen weekly Torah portions, which contain almost no mitzvot.

The medieval Jewish scholar Rashi responds to this discussion with a proto-Zionist argument. We need Genesis, he says, both to affirm that God created everything and is therefore entitled to distribute the world as God chooses, and to prove that the Jewish ties to the land of Israel go back to the earliest times. They are based not only on God’s gift of the land, but also on Abraham’s purchase.

But I think we need Genesis for a different reason. The Torah is not just a book of laws but of instruction and Genesis reflects the realities of human life and particularly of families. Most of the book is about families, and these are real imperfect families, like our own. These are families with problems, jealousy, financial worries, substance abuse and even issues around sex. Families are broken and sometimes healed, their problems seem familiar even thousands of years after this text was written.

In this week's portion, we see the great meaning children had for our ancient ancestors. The portion begins with the prediction that Sarah will have a son, and the great joy when Isaac is born. Abraham has wealth, military success and diplomatic influence, but he tells God that all of these blessings are meaningless to him without having a child. Rebekah and Rachel both plead for a child; like Hannah many generations later, even the favor of a husband, cannot take the place of a child.

The portion also focuses on the possibility of the loss of a child. When Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness, they get lost, and the food and water he has sent with them is not sufficient. Hagar is so distraught at the sight of her son collapsing from thirst, that she is blind to the well that is within reach. Her own emotional pain prevents her from being able to do what her son needs her to do.

Similarly Abraham is at risk of losing his son Isaac. Only at the very last minute is his son spared. All these stories remind us that we should not take our children for granted, the movement from one generation to another is not automatic, but something we must cherish as it is constantly at risk.

The joys and risks for our children today are different but they are still present.

We depend on our children less for our financial security and more for the meaning they give our lives. Though children are a lot of work, and cause us worry and aggravation, they are also, in the words of the Zohar, the source of our joy.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Great Britain, writes about children in writing about this week's Torah portion: "It is as if from the beginning a message was woven into our being. To move from one generation to the next requires a series of miracles... We cherish most what we risk losing...Judaism has never taken its children for granted, because Jews have known what it is like to be an Abraham or a Sarah...Do not lose your children through carelessness, neglect, ambivalence, false values, dominance...that was God's message to Abraham and Sarah's descendants. It is God's message to us."

In Yiddish they say, each child carries its own blessing into the world. As parents we need to be careful to nurture that blessing. A delicate sapling is placed in our hands, it is our responsibility to help it to grow into a sturdy tree.