Learning to Love My Son

By

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Nearly nine months pregnant, I strode a daily three-miles along Terwilliger, a serpentine, cedar-studded thoroughfare bifurcating southwest Portland from evergreen hills and grand mansions. A rush of foreboding blazed through me.

Like the December wind and grey firmament, menacing thoughts rushed past. *What if there’s something really wrong with this one? What if something didn’t show up on the ultrasound, on the amnio? What if he has a... a... syndrome, something that follows him through life, that could ruin him, ruin us? What if he has something that could ruin me? My heart clenched.*

During birth, Edin burned through me like the others had. Even faster—scarcely an hour—I writhed my body with his movement, delivering him into my arms. But that night, the chill returned. He screamed a terror and fury unlike any I’d heard. “What if something’s wrong?” I admitted aloud to my husband, Ailon, craving reassurance. Edin spit up a vast plug of mucus—a common newborn irritant—and settled down. I closeted away my thoughts, ashamed.

It was deep winter now, and Edin was slower than the others to smile. By eight weeks, Ailon and I secretly dubbed him, “Our little simpleton.” I shudder at this admission. But then, I assured myself I’d worried mightily about his three siblings, and they’d all been fine. I would not waste worry on this one.

By 18-months, Edin rarely waved “Bye-bye,” and began to lose the few words he’d had. Ailon, raised on a kibbutz, had learned to accept a vast range of normal. He dismissed my ominous presentiments. “Boys speak later,” he said. “Edin’s exposed to both Hebrew and English; bilingual kids take time.” “He’s going at his own pace.”

By two, I took Edin in, and there began the months’-long process of speech and occupational therapists, physicians and nurse practitioners, telling me and yet not quite telling me. Edin was autistic. I believed them, and I didn’t believe.
In June, an Early Intervention team offered a home visit. To prepare, we’d marked dense sheaves of symptom checklists. Warning signs tumbled in our minds, chasing each other as we sought to banish them. Edin walked on his toes, avoided our gaze, shrieked in crowds, stuffed his mouth so full of whole grain bread he often spewed it forth rather than swallowing.

But his smile, his lips, his eyes, his hair. When I had nursed, he’d stare into my eyes, penetrating my anxieties, melting worry. The rain gave way to sun, straining into our windows, lighting his strawberry hair afire. He snuggled into us, affectionate, attached. He looked so normal, how could anything be wrong?

Early Intervention arrived, and for the first time Ailon heard an expert speak of symptoms. “Does he make strange movements?” On cue, Edin straddled across the hardwood floor on hands and feet. “Will he turn when you call his name?” Edin ignored us. We shuddered, silent with the right responses, while Edin answered wrong.

For months, I’d held fast to a semblance of denial. My husband believed Edin was his own man, okay, simply unique. Now Ailon admitted defeat. My little rocky shore of refusal eroded into a slim spit of sand, sifting, hot, through my fingers. Burning.

Thus crumbled my life. Retirement? None for me. I’d be working always, never to enjoy time alone with Ailon as I’d so often fantasized. Travel? Don’t kid yourself. Reparté with other mothers? They’d espy me with sheer pity. And worse—worst of all—how dare I consider my own needs first? What kind of a mother was I?

No one spoke of this. Where could I read of mothers mourning the loss of their normal child, torn with unspoken, unacceptable grief? Where could I find someone to talk to without feeling like a card-toting member of the freaky kids club? How could I admit my often-selfish worry rather than pure concern for Edin’s future? How would I mother someone not returning my affection? Someone not even turning, except to turn away?

I had pitied parents of children with what euphemistically were called “special needs.” Decades ago, after becoming a Nurse-Midwife, I’d gone to a chapter meeting where a mother brought her baby with Trisomy 21 (Down Syndrome).
Haltingly, through tears, she spoke of how special her son truly was, a child who
“would not grow up so fast,” who “stayed in the sweet baby stage” for so long.

I listened, picking anxiously at my cuticles and turning away to roll my eyes.
This woman was kidding herself. How could she love a less-than child, let alone
rejoice in him? Her slumped shoulders, her tears, her inability to smile—she wasn’t
exulting, she was depressed!

On the streets, I avoided disabled children. As if, in my reproductive years, I
might be contaminated by them. I sighed with a feeling a bit too akin to
schadenfreude. It was not me. I was so relieved, it was not me.

With Edin, it was me, and I stewed in shame with my own evil thoughts. Until
a therapist’s comment that in the evolutionary scheme, I was doing well not to suffer
fantasies of infanticide.

At first diagnosis, Ailon had taken over. An Israeli, former counter-terrorism
policeman, he shifted into action. “Diane,” he stopped me when I’d try to talk about
feelings, “When you enter a bloody scene, you can’t take in the whole picture. You
have to look at just what’s directly in front of you. You have to do your job.”

He did his. Quickly, he found a parent-led program, RDI (Relationship
Development Intervention). This teaches us to guide Edin in how to relate, how to
develop his social and communicative brain, how to discover the best of life is with
others, not alone.

Today, unbelievably and with relief, Edin is four, and I am still here. We have
made it thus far. And I am loving him, fiercely.

I cannot offer something pithy—that learning to love Edin came because
every mother learns to love her child. I cannot say I love him because maternal
hormones took over. I cannot opine that the ubiquitous guilt (our society so
slatheringly perpetuates on all mothers) gave me no choice but to fake it.

Loving Edin has been hard, damn hard. In the beginning I yelled and cussed,
begging him to turn and gaze into my face, to simply smile. I cried hot tears; sure, he
would never be okay. Angrily, I turned from him before feeling the slicing pangs of
his turning first.
But the rocky little spit that had at first stranded me began steadying by accretion, warm grain upon warm grain, shared grin upon shared grin, stacking block—placed by turns between him and I—upon stacking block. Many times we bashed the tower over, but then began again.

I can say I am shocked how easy Edin is to love. I can say we are lucky—he is the one of my four with the sunniest temperament. I can say he is loving and often affectionate, he is searingly smart, he is patient even as I imagine him thinking, “What is wrong with these people? They are such idiots not to understand me!”

Edin complicates life, making marriage harder, consuming attention we need for other children, preventing family vacations or simple dinners out. But I love him fiercely, with a mother love. Not an easily transacted mother love, but a hard-won love. A yearning-to-reach-home-and-crouch-down love, a splaying-my-arms-with-a-grin love—waiting to see if today, as often, he will run into my embrace, his face lit with joy.

I thrill each time Edin comes to one of us, taking our hand to help him play with Thomas trains, sharing an mp3 player he is pretending is a phone, wanting us to take our turn “talking.” I delight in the grocery as he holds his arms up to an almost stranger, burying his face into hers for nose kisses. When he clasps our hands to jump in unison, finds us under a blanket for peek-a-boo, or roughhouses with his brother, I take pure pleasure. Our house sparkles with the sheer timbre of Edin’s giggle.


Instead, I trust and relish my growing, ferocious love. I’ve learned to marvel at Edin’s brain rather than resent it. I am in awe of how different he is, and I work as hard as I can to know. I revel in every moment of our connection, one creamy pearl of understanding on a lifelong strand.

And I nurture the greatest gift of all. Edin has given me hope.
1 Women in Judaism First Annual Writing Competition, Third Place winner in Essays.