

Vayiggash

In one of the most moving scenes in the Torah, Jacob and his son Joseph reunite after twenty-two years of separation. In addition to the length of time, the scene gains gravity from Jacob's belief that his son had been dead all that time.

“Joseph ordered his chariot and went to Goshen to meet his father Israel; he presented himself to him and, embracing him around the neck, he wept on his neck a good while. Then Israel said to Joseph, ‘Now I can die, having seen for myself that you are still alive’” (46:29-30)

The relationship of fathers and sons in the Book of Genesis is most heart-rending and the opposite of what you might expect from a tradition that values family so much. The three father-son relationships featured are characterized by separation and estrangement.

After the Akeida, the Torah has no record of Abraham and Isaac speaking with each other. Jacob receives the blessing from his father Isaac to go to Paddan-Aram, a journey that lasted twenty years, but the Torah does not record another conversation between them. Both Isaac and Jacob are present at their respective fathers' funerals, but in life, they were both estranged from their fathers at the time of death.

Joseph and Jacob have not seen one another in twenty two years. Unlike the relationships between Abraham and Isaac, or Isaac and Jacob, we witness Joseph and Jacob's reconciliation. The separation and estrangement that characterizes the relations of fathers and sons in Genesis is unmistakable, but what is its meaning?

Father-son relationships are both special and challenging. They are special because of the unbelievable bond they represent. The challenge comes when the bond is so strong that individuation is difficult. Perhaps that is the significance of estrangement and separation between

fathers and sons in Genesis. Each of the sons must undergo a period away from his father in order to become his own person.

One of the great twentieth century writers, Franz Kafka, authored a “Letter to His Father,” which has become part of his published works. It is a must read for all parents but particularly Jewish fathers. It begins, “You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you...” (p. 115). The letter provides tremendous insight into the nature of the father-son dynamic during a certain time period, the early twentieth century in the milieu of an assimilated Jewish family living in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Kafka experienced his father’s presence as overbearing, domineering. Given Kafka’s capacity for insight, sharing some passages from the “Letter...” is worthwhile.

Kafka writes, “You were such a giant in every respect. What could you care for our pity or even our help? Our help, indeed, you could not but despise, as you so often despised us ourselves...Only later did I come to understand that you really suffered a great deal because of your children...” (p. 130). Here Kafka describes one of the aspects of the father-son dynamic that is paradoxical. On the one hand, the relationship is characterized by tremendous closeness. You live in the same house as your father, grow up with him. Nevertheless, the gap in age between father and son inevitably leads to misunderstanding. That misunderstanding can only be bridged as the child grows older.

How many people have I spoken with who tell me about how their children thanked them as grown-ups for how their parents raised them even when, at the time, they were angry about how their parents treated them?

As a new father, I finally can experience what my father did, and that experience has helped me understand my father better. When the son becomes a father, an opportunity awakens for new understanding. The gap in age feels less significant as father and son, who is now adult, participate in the same set of emotions now that the son is also a father.

Kafka never became a father, and that is perhaps the reason – though surely not the only one – why he continued to feel estranged from his father even once he became an adult. He writes of the desire to “escape” from his father (138). Is that not precisely what we see in Genesis? Sons must leave their fathers to discover who they are.

One of the main arenas for conflict between fathers and sons is around career, and such is the case for Kafka as we learn from his letter. He writes, “This was the state in which I was given the freedom of choice of a career. But was I still capable of making any use of such freedom?...My valuation of myself was much more dependent on you than on anything else, such as some external success” (p. 153).

Herein is a lesson for fathers. We must always be sensitive to the power we possess. Our sons – our children – may not regard us exactly as Kafka regarded his own father, but I think he does capture something of the grandeur, even the idolatry with which the son conceives of the father.

The image of Abraham bearing a knife over his son Isaac clearly presents the power dynamic that can obtain in the father-son relationship. That power, as fathers know, is matched by an overwhelming sense of vulnerability. What is so striking in the Akeida is how both aspects are present *within* Abraham. He is the one who bears the knife – he holds the power of life and death – but he is also the one experiencing the intense vulnerability that only a parent can know

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when his son is in danger. Abraham's heroism rests in this exquisite combination of countervailing emotions.

As mentioned, our parsha – Vayiggash – is the only one that features a reconciliation between father and son. Jacob differs from Abraham in that he was mired in the feeling of vulnerability, detached from the sense of power that a father often possesses. The belief that his son had been killed had nearly killed Jacob. Their meeting is a kind of resurrection for him but also provides his weary self with the opportunity to die properly.

I do not pretend to have uncovered the secrets of the father-son relationship in this sermon, but I hope that this foray has been an opportunity for you to reflect on this most fascinating and at times troublesome of relationships. I cannot capture the irony of a tradition that instructs us to “teach them faithfully to your children” and portrays three father-son relationships through the lens of estrangement and separation. Perhaps these relationships are extreme examples of the factors governing this relationship: power, vulnerability, and individuation.