

ROSH HASHANAH MORNING 2009

Intimate Relationships: Parents and Children

Abraham and Isaac: The Power of the Words: "My Son"

This past spring a relatively minor, but wonderful limited release film appeared. Every Little Step was a documentary on the casting of the revival of A Chorus Line which was itself, of course, a play about the casting of a play-- based on Michael Bennett's interview tapes from 1974. The most powerful scene in this movie, as it was in the play itself, was in the actor, Jason Tam's, audition for the part of Paul. When the director asks Paul to tell his why-I'm-in-show-biz story, he starts talking about growing up Puerto Rican and gay in New York, finally getting a job in a gritty revue — in drag.

Of course he hasn't come out to his family. Of course they suspect nothing. And then he says this:

We were working the Apollo Theatre on a Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street.

The show was going to go to Chicago. My parents wanted to say goodbye and they were going to bring my luggage to the theatre after the show.

I was doing this oriental number and I looked like Anna May Wong. I had these two great big chrysanthemums on either side of my head and a huge headdress with gold balls hanging all over it. I was going on for the finale and going down the stairs and who should I see standing by the stage door ... my parents. They got there too early.

I freaked. I didn't know what to do. I thought to myself: "I know, I'll just walk quickly past them like all the others and they'll never recognize me." So I took a deep breath and started down the stairs and just as I passed my mother I heard her say: "Oh, my God." Well... I died. But what could I do? I had to go on for the finale so I just kept going.

After the show I went back to my dressing room and after I'd finished dressing and taking my makeup off, I went back down stairs. And there they were

And all they said to me was please write, make sure you eat and take care of yourself.

And just before my parents left, my father turned to the producer and said: "Take care of my son..." That was the first time he ever called me "My son."....

The character, Paul, breaks down in tears, and in the movie, the film cuts to A Chorus Line's 70-year-old choreographer, Bob Avian, completely awash in tears. Bob Avian and the rest of the casting directors knew the play by heart. They had heard the Paul monologue thousands of times, and yet Jason Tam's delivery had them weeping. Everyone in the audience was crying as well. I was crying. It was the most powerful scene in the movie. You don't have to be gay or Hispanic or a dancer or male to weep at the moment when a father says for the first time: "My son."

I left the theater and grabbed for my Blackberry, opened the calendar, went to Sept 19th, and wrote: “My Son”---Just for today. I know this line: My son! I read it every year—at least twice, often more, but I never saw it like this. Suddenly I began to understand the story of Abraham and Isaac in a new light.

The Torah tells its stories with little if any emotion. It often tells the story in the most minimal of language. The words are sparse, the language frugal, and from what is there, and from what is often not there, we are supposed to find its meaning. There is only one conversation recorded between Abraham and Isaac. Just one. It consists of two sentences. Isaac asks: “Daddy! Here is the fire, and here is the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?” Abraham responds: “*Adonai yireh lo ha se leolah B’ni.*” “God will see to the lamb for the offering, my son.”

I can just imagine Isaac saying to himself, as did Paul in [A Chorus Line](#), “That was the first time he called me his son.” Isaac was probably thrilled—ecstatic. Abraham had finally related to Isaac as “my son.” Isaac was no longer objectified as my seed, my inheritance, my promise from God. He was not the boy laughed at and mocked by his older brother, Ishmael, or the weak eyed, vulnerable one. But now Abraham saw him as “My Son!”

Abraham had been a father of silence—perhaps like the Hassidic rabbi, Danny’s father, Reb Saunders, in [The Chosen](#). It’s not that Abraham didn’t speak. He spoke to the servant boys. He had spoken to God, to Sarah, to his nephew Lot, to the angels, but there is no evidence of a conversation between Abraham and Isaac, until, “My Son.”

That probably made Isaac’s day. I can see his eyes lighting up. He felt his gentle, caring father finally paying some attention to him. “He called me, ‘My Son.’” It may have been the most important conversation of Isaac’s life. Abraham with gentleness and love said to the needy son in awe of his powerful, successful father the simple words, “My Son” What meaning and emotion were contained within those words? Acceptance, warmth, unconditional love.

But I hate to tell you, it was a very short lived moment of gentle love. Just a few lines later, there is Abraham standing over his bound son Isaac, knife raised, preparing for the sacrifice—the slaughter. Abraham was so God-intoxicated he was oblivious to the love for his son. There are not many worse stories, full of sheer terror. Here is the betrayal of the trust of a child for a parent, and next, the knife, the altar, the sacrifice that almost happened. Abraham was willing to sacrifice it all. Poor naïve Isaac was taken in by the gentleness of that one—and only—conversation. “He said to me,” “my son.” Why shouldn’t I trust him?”

It is a profoundly painful story. It is as tragic and heart breaking as the story of Paul in [A Chorus Line](#). But the Abraham and Isaac story is part of a continuing motif—one of the core themes in the book of Genesis. The gentleness of “My Son” is a brief interlude in the Biblical narrative of dysfunctional parents and sibling hatred. The story of Genesis is one

of rejection, conflict, bitterness, and envy. It is about fathers and sons and brothers versus brothers.

It begins with Cain and Abel who, in their inability to talk to each other, end in the murder of Abel by Cain. Abraham exiles his eldest son Ishmael, and Ishmael mocks his younger brother, Isaac. Isaac himself is no better a father to Jacob and Esau. He clearly favors Esau, the son of the field and hunting. Jacob resents his rejection and plots with his mother, Rebecca, to steal the family birthright. Jacob and Esau had themselves been in conflict from the time of their wrestling within Rebecca's womb. Jacob repeated the pattern as father to his twelve sons. He favored his youngest, Joseph, and Joseph's brothers hated him for it. They then sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt, assuming he would never be heard from again.

These are difficult and challenging stories in the family drama. And if all we had were these family conflicts it would be a pretty bleak book indeed. But there is another essential motif. This is also a story of reconciliation. When Abraham dies, Isaac and Ishmael come back together to bury their father. When Jacob finally returns from his exile in the home of his uncle Laban, he is a changed person. He has labored for years, and he has also wrestled with an angel who changed his name. He goes out to meet his brother Esau anticipating an attack and war, but instead, Esau comes and embraces him. Esau says that his own life has turned out well, and he is now ready to walk alongside Jacob, limping at his pace.

And the greatest act of reconciliation takes place when Joseph has risen to be second only to Pharaoh in Egypt. His brothers come to him with the request for food, never recognizing him or imagining even that he still lives. Joseph tests them and realizes that his brother, Judah, has changed. Judah is now ready to give up his own life in order to protect the life of the youngest brother, Benjamin. Judah has changed, and Joseph recognizes it and breaks down, saying, "I am Joseph your brother. Who knows if it is not just for this purpose that God has placed me here."

I used to think that the Genesis family dysfunctions resolved with Joseph saying "I am your brother Joseph." Later I thought that the resolution of conflict took place in the life of Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's sons born to him in Egypt. Years ago I asked why on Shabbat we bless our sons by invoking the memory of Ephraim and Menasseh. According to the young Adam Rothschild, they were the only two brothers who do not fight.

But I have come to a new understanding. The final reconciliation for all the family conflicts of Genesis occurs when Jacob takes Ephraim and Menasseh and places them on his knees and blesses them. Ephraim and Menasseh are the only two figures in Genesis who have a Zayde. Jacob was the only grandfather in Genesis. Here is what solves the trauma of Genesis family life. The narrative of fathers who failed, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is finally resolved through a loving grandfather. Finally, after all the years, Jacob is reunited with Joseph. Jacob at the very end of his life has the pleasure of seeing Joseph's sons, the ones born in Egypt, and he blesses them.

Now a “product placement” in the midst of this sermon. On Friday night, October 16th, as part of our Shabbat worship, we will be joined by Ariel Sabar, author of My Father’s Paradise. He is the author of a wonderful book that tells of the conflict between a son and father. The author was a teenager trying his best to be as American as possible in LA, but his father was an immigrant from Iraq and then Israel who was an embarrassment to him.

The book tells the story of his father’s life as a new immigrant to Israel in the ‘50’s. His narrative was of his struggle as a Kurdish Jew looked down upon by the Ashkenazi elite of the new State. But Yona Sabar, Ariel’s father, was an extraordinary student who shaped an academic career as the brilliant expert in neo-Aramaic, a language thought dead but one that he had spoken as a child in Zakho Kurdistan. Ariel’s father came to America to earn a PhD at Yale and then went on to a professorship at UCLA. Yona Sabar is an internationally recognized and honored scholar.

But to his son, Ariel, Yona Sabar was an embarrassment. My Father’s Paradise is a book that details the conflict of a father and son who could not speak civilly to each other. It tells of the tensions and anger of their life together. It’s a wonderful book, and we are lucky to have Ariel Sabar with us on the 16th.

But this past Father’s day, in the New York Times, in The Styles section, in the column Modern Love, Ariel Sabar wrote about new insights gained in watching his father with his own 7 year old son, Seth. Ariel now saw his father in the role of grandfather. *“As a boy I’d seen (my house) as a battlefield, a place where children and parents less often joshed than jostled. I clashed most often with my father.”*

My father was an olive skinned man born in the mountains of Iraq, a fish-out-of-water immigrant who mutilated English and couldn’t get his clothes to match.

(Ariel comes to visit his father with his own son and sees the relationship that exists between grandson and grandfather)

I saw ...my 6-year-old son, Seth who by all appearances felt only affection for my father.

I looked at my dad and saw a man enjoying a kind of second chance at fatherhood. Here was a young boy who adored him.

Why were they such a pair, when my father and I — at least in my memory — were such a mismatch? How is it that the two of them, separated by an even greater gulf of years and culture, coast where we stumbled? At first I wrote it off to the simpler protocols of grandparenthood, with its premium on uncomplicated gestures of generosity and love.

I know that story. Some of you might know it as well. It is, for me, a very personal story. My father and I had a challenging relationship at best. My father was a child of immigrants who grew up in poverty on the streets of Pittsburgh. World War II was the event that shaped his life. (An aside: Yesterday's New York Times carried a front page story about the first Jewish worship service in Germany after the rise of Nazism. It took place in Aachen Germany in October of 1944, a few months after D-Day. If you went to the website you could hear the singing of Ayn Keloheinu and Yigdal amidst the sounds of Allied artillery. My sister wrote to me imagining my father's voice among all those singing on that day. It is possible. We will never know.)

But World War II made him a patriot. The '50's meant that he worked hard to provide for his family. There was no time or inclination to question the values of his culture. I, however, was a child of the 60's. I grew up with certain privileges, mostly an education my father could never have imagined. I was a child of the Vietnam era. The Generation Gap of that era was fought in our living room and at our kitchen table. It was a tough relationship full of conflict.

Many of us share that experience of our own parents and ourselves. But, in my case, there was redemption and resolution. My father was a wonderful grandfather—the best. Perhaps fatherhood had been too hard for him. He was unprepared, unsure of how to act as a father, but being a grandfather removed the pressures and allowed for a gentle softening of the edges. I gained insight into a wonderful grandfather, and there was some measure of forgiveness that rose out of appreciation for a loving grandfather. I realize not all grandparents have the unconditional love gene, but our image is that they more often do than not.

So what does all this teach us? Why do we keep reading these stories of Genesis? It's the same story each and every year. For 33 years I have read the story of Abraham and Isaac. The Torah is the same. The words are the same. The text hasn't changed. But suddenly it's new to me. Genesis 22 hasn't changed. Perhaps I have. I end up at a small movie that most of you never saw, and the text is illuminated in a whole new way for me. Some truth is revealed in sudden depth. There is Paul in A Chorus Line delivering the line: "He said, "My son. Take care of my son." And there is Abraham saying to Isaac: "God will see to the lamb for the offering, My Son"

Those simple words: "My Son." They are words of unconditional love. There is Jacob blessing Ephraim and Menasseh and teaching us that family conflict and trauma can often be resolved, but it may take time. Genesis represents a long narrative, but its message is that forgiveness and understanding are possible.

Each Shabbat we are told to take our sons and daughters and bless them. For our daughters we invoke the memory of the Matriarchs, "May you be as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah." But for our sons we do not use the parallel to the Matriarchs and bless our sons through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Instead we bless them with these words: "May you be like Ephraim and Menasseh"

I have no obvious answer as to why we do this, but I offer this possibility. Ephraim and Menasseh were the only ones to have a grandparent. They knew unconditional love. Each Shabbat perhaps we are to treat our children, each other, all those gathered around the table with the type of love and acceptance that we often ascribe to grandparents in their indulgent ability to overlook flaws. Once a week on Shabbat, or once a year on Rosh Hashanah, we are taught to accept the imperfections in ourselves and in the ones we love.

That is what we seek in our lives, perhaps even why we are here. All we really desire is to hear words that will validate us, that we will feel the embrace of someone who loves us, that we will hear in some way: My son, My daughter, My child, My grandchild, My love. What more do any of us desire? Unconditional love, from parents, lovers, spouses, children, and from God.

We want to know that we are accepted. We are valued. We are loved. So may this New Year remind each one of us that we are precious, cared for, and deeply and profoundly loved, and that we hear a voice that calls out to us, "My Son. My Daughter. My love.