
On Fathers and Daughters

Aryeh Cohen

As my daughter was forcing her way out of the birth canal; as my partner was undergoing that world of pain and sensation generated by the miraculous architecture of the female body that is beyond my ken; as a clump of matted hair gave way to a radiantly beautiful face I would come to know as Shachar; as I stood watching in awe and reverence; one verse forced its way into my consciousness: *va-arubot ha-shamayim niftachu* [and the curtains of the heavens were opened]. (GENESIS 7:11) All the pathways from heaven to earth opened. The move from womb to birthing room was the cosmic journey from the celestial place of divine knowing to the finite place of forgetting. At that moment I felt that Shachar opened the curtain just a bit, and I was almost able to see. It was a moment of purity and holiness.

It was the moment that obliterated any possibility for me to understand how a woman is considered impure after childbirth.

The Talmud (B. KIDDUSHIN 30a) relates that one morning Rabbi Hisda met Rabbi Joshua ben Levi as the latter was rushing through the streets in the morning hours, with child in tow, in a dishevelled state. R. Hisda inquired as to his unseemly hurry. R. Joshua ben Levi replied: "Is it a matter of little consequence to you that the Torah sets the verse, *And you shall make them known to your children*, (DEUTERONOMY 4:9) next to the verse, *the day that you stood before me at Horeb [Sinai]*" (DEUT. 4:10)? R. Hisda understood that R. Joshua was equating the teaching of his child Torah with being present at Sinai. R. Hisda took this to heart. From that day forward, the Talmud

continues, R. Hisda would not taste a morsel of food until he had reviewed the previous day's Torah with his child, and added something new.

Making breakfast for Shachar in the morning, watching her taking in the world, I wonder what it means to teach a Torah that is like standing at Sinai. We sing, *Torah, Torah, Torah/Torah tzivah lanu Moshe* [Moses commanded us Torah] and I wonder whether I am sinking into the banal. Yet, Rambam in his Laws of Teaching Torah says, "From when is the father obligated to teach his son Torah? From when he starts to talk, he teaches him, *Torah tzivah lanu Moshe*. So perhaps this is just the way to start. Perhaps teaching Torah that is accounted as if the teacher were standing at Sinai is not dependent on any specific Torah I might have to teach (an enormous relief), but just the interaction itself is reminiscent of the relationship of God to Israel—as God saw the Israelites wallowing in the blood of their birth and raised them to be present at Sinai. Raised them by being present at Sinai. (EZEKIEL 16:6-8; MEKHILTA OF RABBI ISHAMEL, BO, PARSHAH 5)

But I am brought up short again by the line that immediately precedes the story of R. Hisda and R. Joshua. The line offers commentary on the biblical verse, *And you shall teach them to your sons*: "Your sons and not your daughters."

There is a moment in the life of words and texts that can only be located in hindsight, from a distance. It is the moment when midrash cries out. The moment when the *pshat* [contextual meaning] is mortally wounded and the text bleeds its midrash. It is the moment when the life of a word is radically reconfigured by the life of the community. The writing of the midrash is almost an afterthought. By the time the midrash is known and accepted, the crisis has passed.

When R. Eliezer quoted Jeremiah in the second century: *God will roar from on high, and from God's holy place will give voice, God will surely roar*," R. Eliezer understood that there were three watches in the night, corresponding to the three roarings, and that God roared at every watch. (B. BERACHOT 3a) In the next century, in Babylonia, R. Yitzhak bar Shmuel understood the roaring as signifying a cry of mourning. According to this reading, three times a night God mourns, wailing: "Woe is to me for I have destroyed my house and burnt my sanctuary, and exiled my children unto the nations."

(When the pain of this midrashic bleeding became too awful to endure, some pious copyists changed the text to read: "Woe is to my children, for because of their sins I have destroyed my house and burnt my sanctuary, and exiled them unto the nations.")

I believe we are standing at or near such a moment when midrash breaks through the text, though we will not know for a time. When I study the text of Kiddushin 30a with a group of men and women, we encounter the midrash about sons and not daughters as if we are passing a withered tree in a lush forest. The engagement of the class with the rest of the *sugya* [Talmudic unit] is animated, productive—learning that generates insight. This midrash, on the other hand, seems a pallid attempt to account for a redundant phrase ("to your sons")—an attempt that does not impart the possibilities that midrash usually does. We continue to learn the Gemara, but this midrash seems to stand naked—uncovering, in its wake, the verse it was meant to clothe.

It will be Shachar and her friends who, reading this text, will see under its torn skin and, wallowing in its blood, will come to the words that will already always have been there.

The Talmud (B. KIDDUSHIN 29b) wrestles with the following question: When there are only enough resources to support either one's own study or the study of one's son, which takes precedence? The *Tannaim* [Sages of the Mishnaic period] are divided. One says that the father's own commanded obligation takes precedence. Another adds the caveat that if the son is quick-witted and sharp and retains his learning, then the son's study takes precedence. As illustration, the following story is told.

Aha bar Yaakov was sent by his father Yaakov to study at the academy of Abbaye. When Aha returned home, Yaakov discovered that his son had not lived up to expectations. The Torah he had studied was not ready at hand, the teachings were not sharp, the understanding not focused. Immediately, Yaakov commanded Aha to remain at home while he, Yaakov, would go off to study.

Meanwhile, at the academy of Abbaye, all was not well. A demon had occupied the study hall, preventing anyone from entering. The demon was so ferocious that even during the day (when demons do not usually cause

harm), and even when students approached in pairs (which usually is an adequate defense against demons), the demon would strike them. Abbaye heard that Yaakov was on his way. He ordered all in his community to refuse lodging to the approaching sage. Abbaye reasoned that, lacking other lodgings, Yaakov would spend the night in the study hall, and, because of his stature, a miracle would occur and the demon would be defeated.

Yaakov came and found all doors locked to him. He went up to the study hall and bedded down. The demon appeared to him as a seven-headed monster, a *Tanin*. It was up to Yaakov to reclaim the rabbinic territory from the invading *Tanin* of the surrounding culture. With each bow that Yaakov bowed, a head fell off the monster. Finally, by morning, the sacred precinct of rabbinic lineage was safe.

The story is generated by the insight of the Sages that a conflict over resources is indeed a conflict. Further, a conflict that goes to the heart of the rabbinic enterprise—studying and teaching Torah—and must be resolved by deciding whether the father or the son is the better student of Torah, has the potential to be a conflict of epic proportions. The question that the story comes to answer, however, is “what is at stake in this conflict between father and son?” The answer, of course, is everything. Yaakov sees that the demon is the same *Tanin* whose defeat by God enabled Creation and was cheered by the Psalmist (*You smashed the heads of the Taninim on the water*). Yaakov understands that the inability to reproduce Sages threatens to undo Creation—for this is the tenuous covenant that God struck with Torah and the world.

When learning this passage, I glimpse the life and death reality of the obligation of teaching one’s children Torah. It is not merely for a trivial sense of Jewish continuity, nor is it part of a handing over of heritage—it is the world itself which is at stake. A world that will be maintained only by those who learn and retain their learning and whose learning establishes worlds. The covenant that God struck with Torah and the world—if My children accept Torah at Sinai, then fine; if not, then I will undo creation itself—is at stake with every child who walks into the study hall.

At two weeks I carry Shachar as she cries inconsolably. She does not do this often. Usually she is a very content baby. As I rock her in my arms I hope that I learn this lesson: I don’t always have an answer, a solution. Crying is some-

times what has to happen. I pray that I will always be able to hold her with this same care, love, and equanimity as she cries.

Many nights I rock Shachar to sleep, singing the verses that also welcomed her into the world in her birthing room: *In the name of the God of Israel, to my right is Michael, to my left is Gabriel, in front is Uriel, and behind me is Rafael. Above my head is the Shekhinah of God. Hear O Israel, God, our God, God is One. The Angel who has redeemed me from all evil—may he bless the children and call upon them my name and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac and may they multiply amongst the land.* It is a moment that is good and sweet.

Ve-shinantam, and you shall repeat them to your children.

This phrase from Deuteronomy [6:7] is prominent both ideologically and liturgically in Talmudic ritual, as it is in our ritual today. Twice a day, marking the boundaries of wakefulness, we repeat this central tenet of rabbinic Judaism: Teach your children Torah.

The Talmud (B. KIDDUSHIN 30a-b), however, reads this phrase as: “And the words of Torah shall always be sharpened in your mouth—*shenunim*. So that if a person should ask you something, do not stammer and tell him, but tell him immediately.” Continuing this serious wordplay, the Talmud links phrase to phrase, performing this sharpness with the following stammering tour de force:

For it says, “Say unto wisdom: ‘Thou art my sister,’ etc.” (PROVERBS 7:4).

And it says, “Bind them upon thy fingers, write them upon the table of thy heart.” (PROVERBS 7:3)

And it says, “As arrows in the hand of a mighty man, so are the children of one’s youth.” (PSALMS 127:4)

*And it says, “Sharp (*shenunim*) arrows of the mighty.” (PSALMS 120:4)*

*And it says, “Thine arrows are sharp (*shenunim*)—the peoples fall under thee.” (PSALMS 45:6)*

And it says, “Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them; they shall not be put to shame, when they speak with their enemies in the gate.” (PSALMS 127:5)

Proverbs invokes the erotics of study, of teaching, by citing the sister-lover whom Solomon so famously lusted for, and was pursued by. The

Psalmist then introduces the sharpness that wounds, the sage as hero and gladiator, and finally as victor. At the end of this breathless charge, one question is left unanswered—or perhaps its answer is frightening, disturbing enough to have to be spelled out.

The Talmud asks: “What does ‘their enemies in the gate’ mean?” When did enemies enter into this most central, most intimate moment of *ve-shinantam*, teaching and learning, that started between a father and child, a teacher and student?

Said R. Hiyya bar Abba, Even the father and his son, the Rabbi and his student who labor in Torah in one gate become enemies to one another.

But they do not leave there until they become lovers to one another.

For it says, et vahev be-sufah [Vahev in Suphah] (NUMBERS 21:14).

Do not read be-sufah [in Suphah] but be-sofah [in the end].

The teaching relationship is not neutral. It is the “war of Torah” at whose core is not only the future of the world, but the souls of the warriors. The promise is that they will leave the battlefield as lovers. The Talmud performs this transformation with an unintelligible phrase (*et vahev be-sufah*) in a list of battles in Numbers. Cutting into it, eliding the second letter (*tav*) of the first word, then reading the first two words as one, the phrase bleeds love, *ohev be-sofah: at its end, love*. At the end of the battle of Torah, an end which may be as yet unintelligible to the combatants, is love.

In the end I am left with this. Must all labor go through pain and blood to love? Where is the guarantee that in the end there is love? The midrash says that the Torah that the Holy One of Blessing gave to Israel is written in black fire on a parchment of white fire. I look at Shachar as she revels in this stage of constant radical amazement, as she begins to articulate the world in a language we can understand, and I wonder: Can we see the black fire on the white fire without being consumed?

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