Fathers and Sons

Sara R. Horowitz

He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their sons and the hearts of the sons to their fathers.... (MALAKHI 3:24)

"Everything hinges on where you choose to end the story," a playwright friend often tells me. "If you stop with the blinding of Oedipus, you have a tragedy. But if you see him aging, dependent on his daughter to lead him, you have a tale of maturation and family reconciliation."

This year, as Pesach approaches, I happen to be studying the book of Samuel with a group of women. In my mind, the stories of prophets, warriors, and kings—the vexed issues of dynasty—tickle at the edges of the Haggadah. In the section on the Four Sons, I detect the traces of an unsettling family dynamic. The wicked son, after all, cannot be redeemed. Not every father gets the son he wants.

Troubled connections between fathers and sons permeate the book of Samuel, which presents the institution of monarchy in Israel as both a national and a family dynamic. Until the moment that the prophet Samuel reluctantly anoints Saul as the first king of Israel, civic and military leadership came under the provenance of *shoftim,* or judges, who assumed their positions through divine election or popular acclaim. Some had prophetic gifts, others, battlefield prowess. With no formal mechanism to select new judges, the succession of leadership was unpredictable and eclectic.

Kingship regularizes leadership, with power passed along from father to son. The accident of genetics is placed in tension with individual election by God. Of course, this tension between inheritance and divine election always existed in the Torah. Already in Genesis, the covenant passes to younger, rather than older, sons: from Abraham to Isaac, rather than Ishmael; from Isaac to Jacob, rather than Esau. But the onset of kingship institutionalizes a visible divide between power through dynastic inheritance (kings) and power through divine election (prophets). In the book of Samuel, this tension is dramatized through successive depictions of father-son relationships.

As a prelude to monarchy, for example, the first book of Samuel begins with two parallel stories about a father with a pair of sons. In each story, the father's dreams that his sons succeed him are effectively trounced by God. First, Eli, the priest, harbors hopes that his two sons will follow him as spiritual leaders of Israel. But the sons capitalize on their position as priests for material gain and sexual exploitation. Because of their corruption, the role of spiritual leader passes over Eli's family onto the boy he has taken in as apprentice, young Samuel. God makes this choice clear by speaking directly to Samuel, in a voice that only the apprentice can hear but that the priest himself cannot. Next, Samuel, in his turn, looks to his two sons to take over his leadership, appointing them as judges when he grows old. But they, too, are corrupt, accepting bribes and subverting justice. In the space of a single verse, the elders of Israel note the failings of Samuel's sons and beseech him to appoint a king to govern them. Samuel's resistance to the call for a king, dragging his feet even after God instructs him to anoint Saul, is no doubt linked to his unfulfilled desire for his own two sons to succeed him. In some measure, both Eli and Samuel are fathers who cannot see their children for who they are. Understandably blind to their faults, they just want the kids to take over the family business.

It is not only a matter of sons not living up to the reputation of an illustrious father. Sometimes the merits of the sons exceed the merits of the fathers. Take King Saul and his son Jonathan. Rabbinic sources view Saul ambivalently, depicting him as both righteous and wicked. Often, he is faulted for bad judgment; R. Simeon ben Lakish describes him as merciful when he should be harsh, and harsh when he should be merciful. The book of Samuel gives ample instances of the king's indecisiveness and bad judgment. Sometimes he looks to servants for guidance, rather than showing leadership himself; at other times, he makes quick but ill considered decisions. In contrast, the biblical text frequently depicts Jonathan as having precisely the qualities of leadership that his father lacks. In one of the battles against the Philistines, for instance, Jonathan initiates a daring, solo infiltration of the

enemy forces, while his father sits off at a distance under a pomegranate tree, contemplating his options through divination.

An episode resonant with the earlier sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter highlights King Saul's limitations both as a leader and as a father. Jephthah, a noted Israelite warrior prays for military success, vowing to thank God for victory by sacrificing as a burnt offering whatever first greets him upon his return. When his daughter rushes out to welcome him, he understands that his words have unknowingly condemned her to death. Similarly, when finally rallied into battle by his son's act of courage, Saul forbids his weary troops from eating until the battle has been won. He pronounces a curse on anyone who defies this ban. At a distance from the king and his battalions, Jonathan hears nothing of this. Happening upon some honey, fatigued by battle, Jonathan dips the tip of his sword in its sweetness, tastes it, and "his eyes lit up" (I SAMUEL 14:27). Learning of his father's curse, Jonathan faults Saul for needlessly taxing the fighting men, who battle on in hunger and exhaustion. Perhaps the king intended to force God's hands with a display of pious restraint. If so, his gambit backfires. The king's directive pushes the men beyond endurance, leading them to sin. When they happen upon the cattle of the Philistines, they slaughter the animals and devour them on the spot, defying the biblical prohibition against eating blood.

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Shaken, Saul consults an oracle, asking whether God will grant him a victory. When there is no response, Saul presumes that God is angry with the Israelites, and vows to punish the person responsible— "...even if it was through my son Jonathan, he shall be put to death!" (I SAMUEL 14:39). Again relying on the supernatural, Saul casts lots to determine who has offended God. When the lot falls to Jonathan, the king learns that his own son incurred the curse he pronounced. Saul orders his son executed. Only the protests of the troops prevent Jonathan's death; they save him from the fate of Jephthah's daughter—dying for a parent's rash vow. The troops praise Jonathan for his decisiveness and courage in battle. The soldiers also realize what Saul himself fails to see: that Jonathan "brought this day to pass with

the help of God!" (I SAMUEL 14:45). Although Jonathan is presented as fit for kingship, Saul's dynasty is terminated because of the failings of the father.

Like the Haggadah, the book of Samuel presents us with wise and wicked sons. In both settings, family dynamics mix with matters of heritage and legacy. But unlike the seder, where the father must recognize his son for who he is in order to give the appropriate rejoinder, here fathers fail to discern goodness or corruption in their sons. Whether it's the gifts of priesthood, prophecy, or kingship, the father's failure of discernment has radical consequences: the sons are cut off from their inheritance. Imperfect fathers, these stories seem to suggest, transmit nothing to their children. What does this imply for the passing down of the Pesach story and the spiritual values embedded in it? What parent, after all, can boast perfection?

Perhaps a way of thinking about this issue can be found in the story of King David, where father-son encounters multiply. In his ascendance as king of Israel, David acquires several wives, and a household seething with sibling cruelties and vengeance. Many readers have noted the textual links that connect David, and his unruly household, with the biblical Jacob. Both men navigate wily fathers-in-law—Saul and Laban—who offer them a pair of sisters as wives: in David's case, Michal and Merab, in Jacob's, Leah and Rachel. Both experience love (something the biblical text does not often mention). In Jacob's case, the Torah notes that he loved Rachel. As for David, the Book of Samuel notes that his wife Michal loved him. (So did his brother-in-law Jonathan, and just about everyone else, except for his nemesis, Saul.)

Most significantly in the present context, both men headed troubled households scarred by bitter, often violent sibling rivalry amongst sons of different mothers. In comparable family dynamics marked by favoritism and competition for a dynastic inheritance, sons manipulate, deceive, usurp, and rebel against their venerated fathers. Reuben sleeps with one of Jacob's concubines; Absalom takes David's concubines. Simon and Levi avenge the violation of their sister when their father counsels peace; Absalom avenges the rape of his sister Tamar when his father ignores it.

Most poignantly, however, Jacob and David are linked by loss. Both experience the searing grief of a father for a son who dies before him. Jacob loses his beloved Joseph to a violent attack by a wild beast—or so he

thinks for most of his life. David loses several children: first, the child born out of his adultery with Bat-Sheva. Next, Amnon, murdered by Absalom to avenge Tamar's rape. And finally, Absalom himself, killed by his father's soldiers in the midst of his mutiny against his father.

These, the unspeakable losses of a child, cast a different light on the complicated father-son relationships that the Tanakh depicts. After such a loss, nothing is the same. Viewing what he takes to be Joseph's bloody remains, Jacob is a broken man. The ministrations of his remaining children fail to comfort him, and he declares, "I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol" (GENESIS 37:35). Although his surviving sons variously continue to skirmish, scheme, and mature, Jacob forever sees himself as living out a bitter life sentence. Years later, even after his miraculous reunion with Joseph, Jacob says, "Few and hard have been the years of my life" (GENESIS 47:9).

Unimaginably, David endures such a loss several times over, with no late-in-life reversal. When Bat-Sheva's child ails, David fasts seven days, praying for the child's recovery. After the boy dies, the text records a stoic response. The king bathes, eats, and resumes the daily duties of kingship. While the text records that he comforted his wife, his own reactions are strategic rather than emotional. "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept because I thought: 'Who knows, the Lord may have pity on me and the child may live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again?" (II SAMUEL 12:22-23). A pragmatic thinker, he sees no practical purpose for mourning and so puts his grief behind him. "I shall go to him, but he will never come back to me" (II SAMUEL 23). He accepts the finality of the death of his child philosophically.

When David receives word of Absalom's vengeance, he mistakenly believes that all of his other sons have been killed. The king immediately rends his garments in the formal sign of mourning. It is only after David learns that Amnon alone has been assassinated, and after David's remaining sons return home and break into tears, that—the text tells us—David, too, "wept bitterly" (II SAMUEL 13:36). Why are the tears belated? Perhaps the idea of the murder of his entire family was simply too unreal to elicit a genuine response, whereas he already knew that one could lose a single child. Perhaps the shock of such a mass slaughter put him into a state beyond mourning, like a family Shoah. Perhaps seeing the pain of his other children gave him access to his own feelings. In any event, David did not respond stoically to

this second death. The text notes that he "mourned over his son a long time" (II SAMUEL 13:37).

Although Absalom is killed in the midst of an open rebellion against David's rule, pain tears through the king. Barely articulate this time, the king's cries rip through the text. *B'ni Avshalom b'ni v'ni Avshalom mi yiten muti ani tachtekha Avshalom b'ni v'ni*—"My son Absalom! O my son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son!" (II SAMUEL 19:1) The word *b'ni/v'ni*, my son, is repeated five times, and the name *Avshalom* thrice, within the space of a thirteen word declaration, as though nothing exists but the filial relationship. Despite the political enmity between father and son, David howls with the unbearable grief of a parent for a child. The pain is not diminished by the dark complexity of their relationship, by the ways in which it had gone terribly wrong. Instead, David's grief encompasses it all.

Jacob is more fortunate. Near the end of his life, he discovers that his son Joseph is alive, after all. He weeps on Joseph's neck and says, *Akhshav amutah ha-pa'am* (GENESIS 46:30), a curious phrase commonly translated as "Now I am ready to die." and which means, literally, now I shall die this time, or now I shall die one time. Rashi understands this odd locution to mean that Jacob finds comfort in knowing that he will die only once—that he will die out of his mortal existence in this world, but will live in eternity in the world to come. Men whose children die before them, Rashi suggests, die twice, losing the surety of Paradise and eternity.

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I see in Jacob's enigmatic statement something else—the trace of a wild, but hopeless bargain that a parent tries to make with God: me, not him. Take me, but return him to life. As David with Absalom, Jacob puts his son's life above his own. With Joseph alive, perhaps Jacob is signaling that he is ready for God to take him, in exchange.

Not long after this reunion, Jacob gathers his sons round him. Sensing his own impending death, he wants to offer them some final

thoughts. Looking over his burgeoning clan, he can't help but recollect the motley history of the family—sons who usurp their father's bed, sell their brother, avenge a sister. The bitterness of his life and the family strife stir inside him as he arranges his thoughts for this final exhortation.

The scenario, which occurs at the end of the book of Genesis, resonates with the finale of Deuteronomy where Moses assembles the tribes of Israel—the descendants of Jacob's sons—before his death. There, in a section that begins with the words *ve-zot ha-berakhah*—these are the blessings—Moses announces that he intends to bless *B'nai Yisrael*, the sons of Israel, and then does so.

But Jacob—or Israel—makes no such advance announcement. "Come gather" (GENESIS 49:1) he tells his sons, and begins speaking to them about the life he has known with them—their individual characteristics, strengths, flaws. It is only when he has finished speaking, that he realizes that he has blessed them: *ve-zot asher diber lahem avihem va-y'varekh otam ish asher k'virkhato berakh otam*. The JPS Bible translates this passage as, "This is what their father said to them as he bade them farewell, addressing to each a parting word appropriate to him." But I prefer the more literal translation, with its multiple repetition of "blessing:" "And this is what their father spoke to them, and he blessed them, each according to his blessing he blessed them" (GENESIS 49:28).

The intense and difficult connection between father and son is fundamental to the meaning of Pesach.

Putting Jacob and David together, I see in the composite figure a father who has lost a son, who fantasizes wildly and desperately that the son will miraculously come to life. If only, if only, if only, then the father would be wiser, kinder, gentler. He would accept the son as he is, not as he wishes him to be. He would discern the son's character, even the dark crevices, enumerating every strength and every flaw, and see in it all, only blessing. In the rugged grief of these two powerful men, we bow to the reality of losses that send us reeling. But we discern, too, the great gift of our imperfect but exquisitely precious relationships.

The intense and difficult connection between father and son is fundamental to the meaning of Pesach, and not only because of the emphasis in the Haggadah on intergenerational transmission. It underlies the special Haftarah reading for Shabbat Ha-Gadol, the shabbat immediately preceding Pesach. Drawn from the book of Malakhi, the last of the Tanakh's twelve minor prophets, the reading foretells the redemption of the people of Israel from suffering and exile (MALAKHI 3:4-24). In a vision whose mixture of terror and comfort evokes the fierce complexities of the family dynamics depicted in the Tanakh, Malakhi presents the ultimate reconciliation between God and his people in familial terms, as a relationship between a loving father and his loving son: "...they shall be My treasured possession; I will be tender toward them as a man is tender toward a son who ministers to him" (MALAKHI 3:17).

The reading closes with the image of the prophet Elijah, or *Eliyahu ha-navi*, a figure strongly associated with Pesach, and who, tradition tells us, will usher in the messianic era. In the passage from Malakhi, Elijah's mission is to prepare the Israelites for redemption by bringing parents and children together. "Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord. He shall reconcile fathers with sons and sons with their fathers, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction" (MALAKHI 3:23- 24). The strife between father and son points back to the metaphor of God as Father, underscoring the great gulf to be bridged between God and Israel. At the same time, the verses suggest a profound rift in human family relationships—one so extreme that only divine intervention can heal it. Malakhi's vision highlights the destructive capacity of the father-son bond, but also the redemptive possibilities inherent in its tendernesses, which offer a glimpse of the world-to-come, *me'ayn 'olam ha-ba*.

Unlike the biblical stories about fathers and sons whose elemental feelings pull at them in powerful and demanding ways, the four sons of the Haggadah remain in static configuration with the father. What the biblical fathers don't or won't know about their sons costs them mightily. But the father whom the Haggadah addresses sees his sons for who they are, knows precisely what to respond. He has no need for the bitterly won knowledge that Jacob acquires at the end of his days, nor does he feel the grief and regret that sears King David.

As for the four sons, you might say that their essence precedes

their questions. The wise one asks what he asks because he is wise, the wicked son's question is proof of his wickedness, and so on. No wonder the father knows precisely how to respond! Those of us who deal with real children have a harder time of it. The four sons of the Haggadah are stereotypes, of course, and not real people. These flat, unidimensional figures typify attitudes towards the seder, specifically, and Jewish tradition, generally. The text presents their characters as a given, and unchanged in our reading from year to year to year. The wise one remains wise; the wicked one, wicked; the simple one, simple, and the fourth one never does learn to question.

But when I read that section of Haggadah with the complex and tendentious relations of biblical fathers and sons fresh in my mind, the four sons seem lifted out of their storylessness. I find myself giving them shape, dimension, color, a past, a future. What a family! The wise son always comes first, and the wicked one gets rapped even though his question is not so different from his brother's. I imagine the simple and mute sons as subordinate to the high family drama, pushed out of the limelight by their more sharply defined siblings. The father favors the wise son, sees in him his own interests and values. He can't understand the wicked son, spars with him, even tries tough love. The father's vision of these two boys locks them into positions that hamper them. The other sons, the quiet ones, can't get their father's attention; they suffer from benign neglect. The favoritism and arguments drive them inward. They keep their own counsel. Who knows what they think?

Fleshed out in this way, the four sons are not so much types as a snapshot of a family, arrested at a particular moment. Perhaps they are Jacob's sons, placed anachronistically around a seder table: the favored one, the rebellious one, several who mutter among themselves while their father pays little mind. This year, all are present. Or, this year, one is missing. Eventually, the father begins to see different dimensions in each of his children: wisdom, rebelliousness, envy, nobility, anger, insecurity, shrewdness, maturity. He accepts the sons he has, instead of refashioning them into the sons he wants. If he is fortunate—if they are fortunate—he helps them to navigate their individual personalities.

For us, too, the seder offers a snapshot of our lives in a particular year, at a particular moment. The image may be static, but a series of such images, accumulated yearly and over a long time, tells a story about life, relationships, desire, loss, growth, change. The spiritual inheritance that Pesach represents may be passed along generational lines, like David's dynasty. Or it may jump families, to be shared with friends, or imparted to strangers. There's no telling who will appear in next year's snapshot.

While living it out, we cannot know where our life stories will take us. But the Tanakh presents us with a set of life stories, in which we can see our own aspirations, disappointments, struggles, and triumphs writ large. Punctuated by our knowledge of David's losses, we can take in something of Jacob's belated and hard-earned sense of blessing. And then we might imagine—if only for a moment—that even the wicked son will be redeemed.

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