

A Father's Day Appeal
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Seeing my daughter Mia off to summer camp each morning makes me recall so many wonderful years of my own summer camping experience in day camp and overnight camp, both as a staffer and as a camper. I thrived on camp; I loved every minute of it, and looked forward to it each summer.

Camp had it's own musical repertoire...There were songs about swimming, songs about the bus ride, songs for the morning, and songs for the end of the day. One song that is, in my mind, inseparable from camp, is Harry and Sandy Chapin's 1970's classic, *The Cat's in the Cradle*. For some reason, this folksy song was always sung around the camp-fire...and I have to admit to never really delving too deeply into its meaning...Until recently. Many of you are probably singing it in your heads or humming it to yourselves right about now, but for those who are unfamiliar with the song, the gist of it is a child who grows up yearning for his father's attention, but is always pushed away because "there were planes to catch, and bills to pay" consequently the child "learned to walk while I was away." The powerful, pain-laden refrain is "I'm gonna be like you Dad, you know I'm gonna be like you." The song progresses through the child's stages of life

"Thanks for the ball Dad come on let's play.

Can you teach me to throw?

I said, Not today. I got a lot to do. He said, That's okay."

When the son comes home from college, the father would like to sit with him and catch up for a while, the son's response: "What I'd really like Dad is to borrow the car keys, see ya' later can I have them please."

Long after the father retired, and the son moved away, he says to his son, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind." The son replies: "I'd love to Dad if I could find the time. You see, my job's a hassle and the kids have the flu, but it's been sure nice talkin' to you Dad."

“And as I hung up the phone,” the father reflects, “it occurred to me, He’d grown up just like me. My boy was just like me.”

This song, mindlessly sung by hundreds of campers every summer, is actually riddled with pain and heartache. It seems to describe a father-child relationship that is not at all uncommon, not to us, and not to our biblical ancestors.

This morning we read the chronicle of Korah’s rebellion against Moses and Aaron and its devastating results. One minor detail that is easily passed over in the denouement of the story is that of the 250 Israelites who joined Korah’s rebellion, his own sons did not participate. Not only did they reject their father’s pursuit of power, but they served God faithfully, and have a number of Psalms attributed to their authorship, each beginning with the words “*mizmor shir livnei korah*...A song composed by the children of Korah...” (e.g., Psalms 42-49). This minor attribute has lead me to wonder about what kind of father Korah was, and why while so many followed him, he was rejected by his own family. My own midrashic imagination make me wonder whether Korah’s obsession with self-promotion, power, and fame made him deaf to his family’s needs; I wonder if Korah would fit the image of the uninvolved father in the Chapins’ folk song. The Bible teems with portraits of strange father-son relationships: Abraham walking in awkward, unbearable silence to the altar on Mt. Moriah with his son Isaac; They never speak again after that incident. The mysterious deaths of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu. The waywardness of Eli’s sons and then Samuel’s in the first book of Samuel. The dysfunction of King David’s violent and disrespectful sons, which causes him so much misery in his later years. But the issue of uninvolved fathers is far from solely a biblical reality. Many men still are challenged when it comes to active fatherhood. I am reminded of some of the books I received when Sari was expecting our first child, Mia... They read like survival guides, as if you were about to welcome a wild animal from Amazon into your home. Compared to mothering books, fathers are treated as if their world is about to change so drastically that they must be utterly braced for the arrival of this strange creature into their home.

Fathering can be scary to men who have inherited our culture's predisposition that mothers are the caregivers, and fathers are the providers. "So many men," according to psychologist Aaron Hass, "feel good about themselves because of what they achieve. Men derive a sense of satisfaction from the status they attain. That's how we measure ourselves, that's how we determine our success. You don't get recognized by your peers for being a good father. You engender their respect because of how much money you make, how much power you yield, how productive you have been. And we are always comparing..."¹ Sounds to me a lot like poor Korah of this morning's parasha. But we know that as much as dads are trying to provide for their children, and make sure they have everything they themselves did not have when they were kids, nothing substitutes for active, hands-on fathering.

My brother-in-law is a resident at the Rose Medical Center in Denver where a study was recently done on the roles of fathers in the lives of their children. The results are stunning. Children who have father figures who are actively involved in their lives do better in school, have lower levels of delinquency, and attain higher levels of education and economic sufficiency. As early as preschool, children with active fathers demonstrate better non-verbal skills, such as planning and building. Active fathers help boys develop their gender characteristics. They also help girls form their opinions of men as well as their ability to relate to them. The good news for divorced dads is that the research showed that fathers don't necessarily have to live with their children in order to be a positive influence. They just need to actively involve themselves in their children's lives. Even involved step-dads can make a world of difference--a fact that I can personally attest to.² But Dads need to recognize, as Korah I imagine did not, that their roles as fathers are as important and critical as any other position they hold in life, and I would argue even more important. Unfortunately we don't hear enough of that. While I was recently waiting for a haircut, I was perusing the dozens of different men's magazines from Men's Health to GQ that my barber subscribes to. It struck me that the covers of exactly none of these magazines featured any articles on parenting, family life, fatherhood or the like. Hair-loss, yes. Romance, certainly. Smart dressing, you bet. But

¹ Hass, Dr. Aaron. *The Gift of Fatherhood*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 1994. Page 13.

² Peterson, Elizabeth A. "The Importance of Fathers." Rose Medical Center, Mental Health. Denver, CO, 2003.

not a word about being a good dad. Men need community on this issue. It's time we start talking more about it.

One place to start is the Talmud...*Massekhet Kiddushin* provides a program for an activist father. The Gemara states on page 29a that “*ha'av hayav be'vino*,” a father is obligated to his son in the following responsibilities: He must see to his son's brit milah, redeem him if he is a first born, teach him Torah, help him find a wife, and to teach him a trade or profession. The Gemara adds, “*af lehashito bamayim*,” he must even teach him to swim, because in an age of sea-faring transportation his life may someday depend on it. (Today some suggest that might not only mean swimming, but perhaps even how to drive safely). What I find so meaningful about this list is that with the exception of seeing to a *brit milah* and a *pidyon ha'ben*, all the other items on the list require a serious investment of time, energy, and devotion from the father to his son. Our Sages long ago knew the importance of an involved father.

But how do we accomplish this in today's rough and tumble world? Do you know what Patagonia (the outdoor clothing co.), Timberland, IBM, Microsoft, Merrill Lynch, and JP Morgan & Chase have in common? They all offer paid paternity leave.³ Thankfully the times are changing and corporate America is embracing the importance of fatherhood. A study found that while around 30% of Fortune 1000 companies offer paid paternity leave, only about 1% of eligible fathers take advantage of it.⁴ An executive with the accounting and tax firm KPMG, which also offers paid paternity leave, reported that “Men are still -- wary of the impression it might make that they're not dedicated to their jobs.”⁵ And so we work overtime and weekend time and during what should be family time in order to prove ourselves to our employers and our coworkers. But that priority system is misplaced. My friends it is time for a radical readjustment of how we spend our time and energy. For those of you who haven't heard, Mommy and Me is now called Parent and Me, and I was not the first dad to bring my kid to Music Together

³ Sixel, L.M. “Paid Paternity Leave More Popular than Expected.” Houston Chronicle, May 16, 2003.

⁴ Hass, pg. 21.

⁵ Dunnewind, Stephanie. “Attitudes About Paternity Leave Are Changing.” Seattle Times, November 8, 2003.

classes—taught in fact by one of our own CSI dads, Joel Shickman. We’ve simply got to go to the ballgames, ballet recitals, parent-teacher conferences, and family meals consistently for our kids. To all the men who are here today, what you can give to your kids as an active, involved father is invaluable and what our kids miss out on by being prioritized beneath work, is no less than detrimental.

My comrades in fatherhood, I understand the feeling of utter exhaustion at the end of a crazy workday. I know the feeling of fried nerves, and weary bones after working from dawn to dusk. I am well aware of the need for “down time” after a hard day’s work. That’s why I love and embrace the gift of Shabbat. It is Shabbat that guarantees me liberation from the bonds of work, phone calls, errands, and emails. In this uninterrupted time, I am fully available to my children and they have my full attention as their father. From our weekly walks to shul together, to our family Shabbat dinner, to our leisurely afternoons after services on Shabbat, as a father I realize the fullness of God’s gift of Shabbat. Let me tell you, fellow fathers, if you suffer from a hectic workweek, you need Shabbat for its invaluable Dad-time.

None of us wants to alienate our kids like Korah, or the father in Cat’s in the Cradle. But in order to become the involved dads we ought to be, we need to shed the cultural assumptions and traditional parental roles to embrace our kids while we can. I want to close with an excerpt from the moving words of one of President Ronald Reagan’s many eulogizers. This particular eulogy did not grab the press’s attention like some others, but I think it was among the most poignant.

“I’m Mike Reagan. You knew my father as governor, as president. But I knew him as dad. RR adopted me into his family in 1945. I was a chosen one. I was the lucky one. And all of his years, he never mentioned that I was adopted either behind my back or in front of me. I was his son, Michael Edward Reagan...When his families grew to be two families, he didn’t walk away from one to go to the other. But he became a father to both. We looked forward to when he would pick us up...and we would ride to his ranch and play games and he would always make sure that it ended up a tie. We would swim

and we would ride horses or we'd just watch him cut firewood. We would be in awe of our father...

At the early onset of Alzheimer's disease, my father and I would tell each other we loved each other and we would give each other a hug. As the years went by and he could no longer verbalize my name, he recognized me as the man who hugged him. So when I would walk into the house, he would be there in his chair opening up his arms for that hug, hello, and the hug goodbye. It was a blessing truly brought on by God. We had wonderful blessings of that nature. Wonderful, wonderful blessings that my father gave to me each and every day of my life."⁶

It seems that for all Ronald Reagan was, he was also an exemplary father. On this father's day, let us revisit the sacred responsibility of fatherhood. Let us open up our arms more often to embrace our children, to kiss them, to tell them how much we love them and are proud of them every day—for these things it is never too late. Let us embrace the gift of shaping and influencing our children in ways only fathers can. Let's give our kids that gift for father's day this year; and I guarantee it will give us more pleasure than the ties, cologne, and barbeque sets that await us tomorrow morning. Shabbat Shalom, Hodesh Tov, and Happy Father's Day to all.

⁶ Associated Press. "Text: Eulogies by Ronald Reagan's Children." Pittsburgh Post Gazette, June 12, 2004.