

FATHERS AND SONS

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The historical books and passages in the Tanakh abound in fathers begetting sons. Here, I shall focus on a few well-known father-son pairs in the Bible where sons were mostly unlike their fathers. Curiosity as to why there is a wide gap between these fathers and sons is frustrating because of the notorious brevity of biblical narration. There cannot be any greater contrast between the biblical style of narration and that, say, of Homer. Jacob's grief at the loss of Joseph is described in precisely two verses (Gen. 37:34-35), while that of Priam for his son Hector in a large number of hexameters. Thus, biblical narration offers few objective hints on which to base psychological insights on one side, and free rein of imaginative interpretation on the other.

THE KRETCHMER SYNDROME

ABRAHAM - ISAAC

From my readings on psychology, decades ago, I remember the work of a well-known psychiatrist Ernest Kretchmer,¹ who divided humanity into three major types: pyknic, asthenic, and athletic. The pyknic, he surmised, is the one who makes history, and the asthenic the one upon whom history is made. If such typology has any validity, Abraham could be characterized as the pyknic and his son Isaac as the asthenic type.

At the advanced age of 75, Abraham bursts upon the biblical scene. A towering, iconoclastic figure, he made history by initiating monotheism. On the basis of some Divine promises, he leaves his birthplace and, via Haran, enters the land of Canaan. Abraham is a highly complex person. We note Abraham confronting the Lord in the matter of Sodom, but are astonished by his silence and full submission to the Divine demand that he sacrifice Isaac. We find him a man of military prowess when he frees Lot from captivity. Essentially a man of peace, he offers his nephew Lot the choice of land when they go their separate ways. Renowned for hospitality and kindness, he yet banishes Hagar and his son Ishmael, acceding to the urging of his wife Sarah.

Isaac, in the biblical record, is Abraham's opposite. He is quiet, passive, introspective. Esau and Jacob choose their brides, but Isaac's bride is chosen by Abraham's emissary. While his father Abraham and his son Jacob are constantly on the move, Isaac remains basically in one place. Even *the water wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham's death* were dug up anew by Isaac, *giving them the same names as his father had given them* (Gen. 26:18). Isaac is dominated, even manipulated, by his own wife.

His incomprehensible submissiveness is displayed at the seminal Akedah! The biblical record is almost painfully scant on the interaction between Abraham and Isaac. It is only from the Divine command *'Take now thy son, thine only son, whom you love'* (22:2) that we become aware that Abraham loved Isaac. This peculiar silence between father and son is seen on the fateful three-day journey to the *place of which God had told him* (22:9). The following is the totality of dialogue between the two (22:7-8):

Isaac: *'My father, behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'*

Abraham: *'God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.'*

A three-day journey and these are the only words exchanged between father and son? No outer signs of a father profoundly distressed, and no expression of a growing fear and apprehension on the part of the son? Would we not expect after the release of unbearable stress, when the test came to a happy conclusion, that father and son fall into each others' arms and utter thanks to God? The Torah maintains silence. However, precisely in these three days of great emotional stress, which could have spelled irreparable rift between son and father, scripture states categorically *they went both together*, and repeats the same statement when Abraham placed the wood on his son, again when Isaac inquires about the lamb, and after the test was over. They went both together, and they still do; Abraham symbolizing Jews who are trailblazers, and Isaac symbolizing Jews who are victims.

REBELLIOUS SONS

GIDEON AND ABIMELECH

Gideon is best known as a mighty man of valor, using the military strategy of night attack, surprise, and shock to free some tribes of Israel from the yoke

of the Midianites (Jud. 6-9). On careful reading of the relevant chapters, there emerges a man *enveloped by the spirit of the Lord* (6:34) and of great humility. It is by this spirit that he risks his life, demolishing an altar of Baal and replacing it with one dedicated to the Lord. Inspired by the Lord, he accepts, after some hesitation, the Divine mandate to save Israel from the hand of Midian (6:14). He sends messengers to the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, gathering them at Ein-Harod to do battle against the enemy. There he reduces the force to 300 men, those that *lapped the water with their tongues*. He rises to the heights of a man driven by the spirit of the Lord when after his decisive victory he receives the offer from the men of Israel *'Rule thou over us, both thou and thy son, and thy son's son'* (8:22). Gideon refuses, saying *'the Lord shall rule over you'* (v. 23).

He is a man of great humility. His first objection to being God's messenger was *'Behold, my family is the poorest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house'* (6:15).

One can hardly conceive of two more contrasting personalities than those of Gideon and his son Abimelech. Born of a concubine, Abimelech's first steps after the death of his father were to conspire with his mother's clan in Shechem to massacre Gideon's other 70 sons. Thus, while Gideon recruited men of Israel to rid the land of an invader, Abimelech conspired to assassinate his half-brothers. While Gideon, true theocrat, rejected dynastic monarchy, Abimelech realized his ambition to be crowned king, holding sway over Israel for three years. While Gideon's humility united Israel, Abimelech's arrogance brought discord, even in Shechem, seat of his power, where its citizens *broke faith with Abimelech* (9:23). Fighting against the insurgents, he recaptured the city, massacring the people therein. Abimelech's rampage of murder ended only with his death. We note that in the case of Abimelech, the great principle of reward and punishment was realized. He was killed by a woman who dropped a millstone on his head: *Thus God repaid Abimelech for the evil he had done to his father by slaying his seventy brothers . . .* (Jud. 9:56).

DAVID – ABSALOM

Abimelech's atrocities and conduct constituted a rebellion against the very spirit of Gideon, but were committed only after the latter's death. Absalom's

rebellion was motivated by a son's ambition to replace his father. Father and son were quite similar in spirit and personality. Both were handsome and charismatic. Both manipulated circumstances to promote their life's ambition and seize opportunities to make them come true. Both had deep resentments, quietly nursing them while waiting for the opportune moment to strike. Thus, David instructs Solomon to deal wisely with Joab and not let him die in peace, because he killed Abner and Amasa *shedding blood of war in peacetime*, and also with Shimei who *insulted me outrageously* when he himself fled from Absalom (I Kg. 2:5-8).

King David *was greatly upset* (II Sam. 13:21) by the rape of Tamar, Absalom's sister, by his oldest son Amnon. However, no disciplinary measures against the crown prince are recorded. Absalom's reaction to the abominable deed of Amnon was typical of him. *Absalom did not utter a word to Amnon, good or bad, but Absalom hated Amnon* (13:22). Two years later, he murdered him. Fearing the anger of his father who *mourned over his son a long time* (13:37), Absalom fled to Geshur, remaining in exile for three years. A reconciliation between father and son was effected by Joab, seeing that *King David was pining away for Absalom* (13:38), sealed by the King kissing his son. One notes that the love was not reciprocated by Absalom. Resentment against his father for David's seeming passivity toward Amnon's rape of Tamar must have deepened during his exile, turning into hatred. Opportunity to unseat his father opened up due to the waning popularity of David.

The Book of Samuel offers a vague hint of the growing disaffection of large sections of Israel's population toward the King. In his early reign, *David reigned over all Israel, and David executed justice and righteousness to all his people* (8:15). This is followed by a list of his major officials. In II Samuel 20:24, many years later, the name of Adoram who was "over the levy" was added to that list. Is it then possible that forced labor gangs raised under a newly established system of corvee was the root cause of disaffection?

A CASE OF DUAL LOYALTY

SAUL AND JONATHAN

*How are the mighty fallen
Saul and Jonathan, the lovely and the pleasant.
In their lives, even in their deaths*

They were not divided (II Sam. 1:23).

David, lamenting for his friend, could not have found a better expression to portray one of Jonathan's superb personality traits, loyalty. He was loyal to his father, King Saul, whose judgments were on occasion severely clouded due to bouts of deep depression and explosive fury; loyal unto his death to the King with whom he disagreed on matters of strategy and on the matter of David. These disagreements are clearly documented in I Samuel.

Shortly after he was crowned king, the Philistines became a serious threat to Saul. They not only kept garrisons deep within the borders of Israel but also, having a monopoly on smiths, deprived Saul of the ability to produce military equipment. It is in these sad circumstances that Jonathan, in charge of 1000 men, took the initiative and smote a Philistine garrison, provoking a major confrontation. Saul's army, disorganized and in flight, now reduced to a mere 600 men, faced the might of the Philistines. It is again Jonathan, together with an armor-bearer, who attacked a Philistine outpost, causing them to flee in panic. Saul, noting that the enemy was in mass retreat, adjured his men by oath to keep a fast, and then pursued the Philistines. Jonathan, when told of the King's oath, exclaimed, *'My father has troubled the land'* (I Sam.14:29), knowing that if Saul's men had not been weakened by lack of food, they would have dealt the Philistines a major blow.

The tension between father and son, due to differing strategic thinking, was now exacerbated by a growing friendship between Jonathan and David. It had begun after the young David slew Goliath and *the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David* (18:1). Jonathan, an adventurous spirit and a man of initiative, was convinced that the war needed to be brought to the camp of the enemy, and found in David a kindred soul. On three occasions, Jonathan renewed a covenant with David (18:3, 20:14, 27:17), much to the justifiable dismay of King Saul, who realized that *the Lord was with David* and that this was a threat to his dynastic ambitions.

Being emotionally disturbed, but certainly no fool, Saul became increasingly aware of Jonathan's deference to David. At David's absence from the King's table at the festive New Moon meal, Saul flew into a rage against his son, insulting him *'You son of a perverse, rebellious woman . . . I know that you side with the son of Jesse to our shame and to the shame of your mother's*

nakedness, (20:30). And when Jonathan defended David, the King threw a spear at him.

Jonathan, one of the noblest personalities in the Bible, persisted in his dual loyalty to his friend and to his father, until his death in the battle against the Philistines at Gilboa.

ROTTEN APPLES

ELI AND HIS SONS

The mental picture I have of Eli, retired judge and high priest in Shilo, is that of a benevolent grandfather, sitting on a chair, watching with suspicion a woman who was whispering her intent prayers. Thinking that she was intoxicated, he gently reprimanded her. Once assured that she had been pouring out her heart in supplication, praying for a child, he blesses her *'may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him'* (I Sam.1:17).

Eli had two sons, scoundrels who abused their status as priests by forcibly appropriating sacrifices brought by the people, and even *lay with the women who performed tasks for the sanctuary*. When Eli heard the evil reports, all he said to them was *'Do not my sons. It is no favorable report I hear the people of the Lord spreading about'* (2:24), a gentle rebuke ignored by his sons. We sympathize with the old man, and we mourn his sudden death when he heard about the major defeat at the hands of the Philistines which resulted in both his sons dying in battle and the capture of the Ark of the Lord. One gets the impression that the abominable behavior of his sons is the consequence of a too gentle father, who was unable to discipline them.

SAMUEL AND HIS SONS

The biblical record is quite hazy on three issues regarding the relations between Samuel and his two sons. Samuel, the last and greatest of the Judges, prophet, kingmaker and kingbreaker, residing in Ramah, served as circuit judge, making yearly rounds of Beth-el, Gilgal, and Mitzpah. Thus, on first sight, it may be reasonable to assume that Samuel, overburdened by his responsibilities, appointed his two sons as judges in Beersheba in order to lighten his work load. However, in the light of succeeding events, the question could be raised whether he intended to break centuries' long tradition of charismatic leadership by establishing a dynastic one.

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As it turned out, his sons *were bent on gain, accepted bribes, and subverted justice* (I Sam. 8:3). The corruption of the sons, and the threat of the Philistines, compelled the elders of Israel to request Samuel to appoint a king. Please note what they said to him: *'You have grown old and your sons have not followed your ways, therefore appoint a king for us'* (8:5). The statement that his sons did not follow in his steps may be a veiled indication that, had they followed in his ways, the elders might have felt differently regarding a king. Later, when Saul, after a decisive victory over the Ammonites, was inaugurated as monarch, Samuel, who officiated at this august event, demanded from the people that they testify as to his integrity. In his speech he makes a seemingly non-sequitur statement *'I have grown old and gray, but my sons are with you . . .'* (12:2).

What did he really mean? Rashi does not comment. Radak suggests that the sons would be available to maintain his teachings. The Metzudat David interprets it to mean that his sons, like the rest of the people, will be there to serve the king. Gordon views *but my sons are with you* as a rebuke, demoting his sons.² I subscribe to this view, for it at least partially answers the question of why Samuel did not put his sons to task for their corruption. The narration offers no clue as to the sad failure of a great father who had rotten sons.

IN THE SHADOW OF A GREAT FATHER

MOSES AND HIS SONS

Moses, the great emancipator, lawgiver, a prophet speaking face to face with God, is essentially a tragic person. He is not permitted to enter the Promised Land, and he seems to have had an unhappy family life. Though Scripture is not explicit on this issue, there are strong indications that his family life is dysfunctional. His relationship to his wife Zipporah is troubled. In Exodus 18:2 we are told that his father-in-law, visiting Moses in the desert, brings Zipporah with him *after he had sent her away*. It is not clear when this had occurred. In Numbers 12:1, we read that Moses had married a Cushite woman, followed by obscure complaints by his sister Miriam. Did she upbraid him for leaving Zipporah? We do not know for sure.

While Moses' relationship to his wife is shrouded in darkness, that to his two sons is absent. In the Pentateuch, his older son Gershon is mentioned when Zipporah gave birth (Ex. 2:22). In the incident at the inn, when the

younger son is circumcised by his mother (4:24-25), he is not even referred to by name. Only in Exodus 18:2 are both sons mentioned by name, with the reasons why Moses had called them Gershon and Eliezer.

At any rate, his sons were not in Egypt during the trying period of Moses' negotiations with Pharaoh. Neither were they participants in the seminal events of the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea, and it is questionable whether they had witnessed the theophany at Sinai.

When Moses requests that the Lord set a man to follow him in leadership (Num. 27:16-17), Rashi senses some yearning of Moses when he says:

When Moses heard that the Holy One told him to give the inheritance of Zelophehad to his daughters, he said that the time had time for him to claim his needs, that his sons should inherit his high office. Said to him the Holy One: . . . Joshua is worthy to receive the reward for his service

Parenthetically, Moses' descendants make an appearance in two passages of the Tanakh. Judges 18:30-31 mentions a certain Jonathan, son of Gershon, son of Moses, *who served as priest to a graven image that the tribe of Dan had set up in its sanctuary*. In all probability, embarrassed by an unworthy progeny of the great Moses, the author squeezed in an upper "N" in order to disguise the name of Moses [which became MnSHE]. In another passage (I Ch. 26:24-25), we are informed that some descendants of Gershon and Eliezer, sons of Moses, served as chief officers over the treasury of David. Quite a descent!

EPILOGUE

The Tanakh is about real people. They are no saints. They have their strengths and their foibles, bringing them close to us; we recognize them. However, we do not discover any pattern of father-son relationship in the Bible. How do we account for the fact that King Ahaz, who aped heathen practices of neighboring nations, even *moving his son to pass through the fire*, was a father of the righteous King Hezekiah? And that Hezekiah, in turn, fathered Manasseh, probably the worst Judean king?

We all know of fine parents whose children stray, and we know of people rising to greatness whose parents' conduct was more than questionable.

NOTES

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1. Ernest Kretchmer identified three types of physiques, finding correlations between them and specific behavioral patterns.
2. S. L. Gordon, *Tanakh im Peyrush Hadash* (Tel Aviv: S.L. Gordon Publishers, 1966).