

"OUR FOUR FATHERS"

It has often occurred to me, somewhat half-consciously, that we are being terribly unfair to young people. For all the Haggadah's concern for them, we tend to be quite patronizing. Year after year, for centuries, we malign our children by subjecting them to a rather arbitrary system of classification. K'negged arbaah banim dibrah Torah, "concerning four sons did the Torah speak" -- and the emphasis often seems to be on the k'negged -- literally, "against." We divide up the victims of our analysis. We are willing to call one of them a hakham, a wise son. But to the others we are less complimentary -- we called them wicked, foolish, and so abysmally stupid that they have nothing to say.

But the time has come, I believe, to turn the searchlight of our scrutiny on parents instead of children. Not all parents, after all, are perfect paragons of virtue; indeed, I have never met one who is. These are days when children judge their parents and students sentence the faculty. Let us then, with full apologies to the author of Haggadah, forsake the dissection of the character of our children; and instead of the Four Sons, let us speak this morning of Four Fathers and proceed to a typology of American Jewish parents.

Naturally, no one is ever a pure type; we are composites -- a little of one category, more of a second class, none at all of the

third. Furthermore, these four do not exhaust all possible sorts of parent. But, no less than the arbaah banim, our Four Fathers do symbolize four sorts of parents we are likely to encounter in the course of life.

K'negged arbaah avot dibrah Torah -- concerning Four Fathers did the Torah speak, for I find them all represented in one key verse of the Bible concerning the exodus and the Haggadah:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדָמָה לְבָנֶיךָ בְּהַיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר כִּי עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם

"and you shall tell your son on that day, saying, because of this did the Lord do unto me when I went out of Egypt." These four are: the Domineering Father, the Wise Father, the WASP Father, and the Democratic Father.

The first of our Four Fathers is the one we shall call the "Domineering Father." Our Domineering Father has the perfect excuse for his paternal aggressiveness and his insensitivity to his son as an autonomous human being. The first word in our verse is, after all, ve'higadeta -- "and you shall tell." And so he does -- he "tells," he "orders," he "commands." He even outdoes the Bible: not only does he "tell" his son, but he "tells him off." Communication between Father and Son in this kind of relationship is one-way only; from Father to Son. It is a relationship which satisfies the father's embattled psyche, but leaves his son and all others in the family disarrayed and repressed.

How destructive, this Domineering Father who lays down the

law, who can carry on no intelligent and mutually respectful conversation with his son, who's only answer to every question is, "Because I said so." A whole generation of American Jews was sidetracked from Judaism by parents who "told" instead of "taught", by melamdin who used an outsized ruler instead of insight and understanding. So a generation arose which neither learned nor listened nor obeyed -- and wallowed in the dark abyss of Jewish ignorance.

This father is a she'eino yodeia lish'ol -- he does not know the secret of "asking," of encouraging a child's curiosity, of respecting him as a separate and worthy personality. He is too busy with the ve'higadeta to hear the ki yishalkha binkha. He fails to appreciate that questioning is a sign of life and vitality, that not all questions have been asked before, that new generations are enmeshed in new problems, and that he must not be afraid to admit that he does not have all the answers, for indeed not all questions have answers. His no-nonsense attitude leads him into the greatest nonsense of all -- a foolish technique guaranteed to fail. Such a she'eino yodeia lish'ol Father can succeed only in raising a she'eino yodeia lish'ol son -- a son who no longer cares to ask.

This Domineering Father comes in two varieties. The first is the one who himself was observant, and tried to bully his son into following him. But this type of a generation or two ago has now largely given way to a far worse sort -- the one who is himself non-observant but wants his son to practice and learn. His inner

guilt expresses itself in sending, but not bringing, his child to "shul" and school. His son beholds him, observes his shallowness, perhaps obeys out of fear -- and resolves to have no part of this charade of "pediatric Judaism" once he has outgrown it and is on his own. The father's ve'higadeta falls on deaf ears. Such a father domineers, but he does not dominate.

The second of our Four Fathers, the Wise Father, knows what the Domineering Father does not: that you cannot fill a child's head and warm his heart by twisting his arm. While the Domineering Father lays down the law by "telling" his son, the Wise Father teaches the law by talking with his son; for a wise Father, as a hakham, raises a son in his own image: a ben hakham. (I do not mean that the results are guaranteed, for there are no fool-proof ways to success in raising children. There are psychological and sociological circumstances beyond the control of any parent, no matter how well-intentioned or competent. But certainly, a Wise Father stands a better chance of raising a Wise Son than an unwise parent.) And concerning such a father, the Haggadah itself reveals his secret of success: v'af attah emor lo ke'hilkhote ha-pessah -- "you shall speak with him concerning the laws of Passover." Notice: not "tell," but "talk" or "speak." The Wise Father will have to be a disciplinarian -- but he will not become a "boss," a petty tyrant; instead, he will be a teacher. And the law he teaches will be

ke'hilkhoh ha-pessah -- the laws of freedom, liberating and not oppressive. It is important, terribly important, to emphasize this point. For otherwise the restrictions imposed upon one who submits to the Torah's discipline seem harsh and oppressive; when, in fact, the laws of the Torah are not only harut but also herut, they are the means to a life of freedom.

This Wise Father too has read the Haggadah, and he too knows of the Biblical expression ve'higadeta. But he translates that in its Aramaic sense; for in that language the word signifies not the harshness of "thou shalt tell," but the gentleness of "thou shalt attract." While the Domineering Father sees in ve'higadeta the commandment to push his son, the Wise Father sees in it the mitzvah to pull him -- with kindness and conviction. He endeavors to make Torah simply too beautiful to resist.

Even more important, the Wise Father would never think of imposing any duties on a child that he does not himself practice. For the attitude of "do as I say, not as I do" is not only unethical and immoral -- it is also unwise and ineffective. The Wise Father, therefore, will teach his son about Torah and Passover, and he will say -- as the verse continues -- baavur zeh -- "because of this did the Lord do unto me..." And the Sages, quoted in the Haggadah, explained the use of this demonstrative pronoun by saying that the ve'higadeta of the father had to be spoken only be'shaah she'yesh matzah u-maror munahim lefanekha -- while the matzah and maror are

on the table lefanekha, "before thee." That is, the Wise Father will teach his son to do what he does. He will not send him to eat matzah and marror, but invite him to join him in his religious observance. He will not drive him to "daven," but pray alongside him. For this is the way of wisdom -- example and not coercion.

The third of our Four Fathers is probably the most pathetic. To describe him in public is to invite the charge of exaggeration, of caricature. But I know he exists. I have met him often. And I pity him.

This is the WASP Father. "WASP" is the euphemism for the highest-status American in contemporary society, a word formed by the initial letters of "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant." The Jewish WASP-Father is, of course, not a real WASP at all -- but all his life he spends, or wastes, in wishing that he were one. He cannot forgive God or his parents for the calamity of having been born Jewish and the son of immigrants, or himself not a native American. He knows that in our society a man must identify with some religion, and so he acknowledges his Judaism -- but it has got to be simon-pure American. He will not permit the stigma of foreignness to harm his children. They must never know that they are the children of aliens; certainly not, Heaven forbid, that they are even now in galut.

This complex-ridden, burdened WASP Father, driven to distraction by the accident of birth, is willing to identify as a Jew, willing to give his charity to Federation and UJA -- though the former is preferable to the latter -- and even to join a Temple and

participate in a service, provided it is not "too Jewish." What bothers our WASP Father is that he is expected to tell his son be'tzeti mi-mitzrayim, that he comes from Egypt, that he did not come to America with Columbus, that there is something of the foreigner about him, that the Jew, by virtue of his history, is a perpetual outsider and at least marginally an alien. He wants his children to be unburdened by the immigrant onus, by the memory of a miserable and difficult minority-status past.

What a comic creature he is, this poor, frustrated, would-be WASP. He tries to forget Yiddish, if he hails from Eastern Europe ^{and} he would not be caught reading a Yiddish newspaper; yet more and more this language seems to be insinuating itself into acceptable English in literature and on the stage. He is irritated by special Jewish foods, and yet discovers that they are considered delicacies, and that his grocer displays products of old American firms bearing the O-U. He raised his children without informing them that there was a Hitler in the world, and he is then shaken when his children are confronted by anti-Semitism and do not know what it means or how to react to it. He has educated his children to dispense with Jewish concerns and to fight for the civil rights of the Negro -- this latter is as it should be -- and then does not know how to explain to them that the looters in the riots single out Jewish stores for burning.

I met one such type of would-be WASP this past winter at

the Kotel Maaravi in Jerusalem. She was obviously Jewish, an American tourist with a pained look on her face as she observed young Hasidim swaying in prayer. What a sublime scene -- the Wall, the ancient, hoary wall now reembracing her children after her long exile. This Wall from which, as ^{the} Sages said, the Shechinah never departed, was now again in Jewish hands, and here were devout Jews in prayer at the Wall without having to beg leave of British or Arabs. What a sense of vindication! What an exalting experience! Yet, here was this poor woman, visibly disturbed. Why was she so wretched? It hurt me to notice her distress in the midst of this sublime joy. I overheard her exclaim, spitting out the words: "Why must they dress and act that way?" How embarrassed she was! I engaged her in conversation in order to learn more about her, and discovered that this distinguished blue-blood American from the Bronx was not a member of the DAR, and her ancestors had not debarked from the Mayflower. Rather, she was herself born, in an obscure hamlet on the outskirts of Warsaw, to a bearded father and be-sheiteled mother! What a waste this self-hatred! How wearying this wistful, would-be WASP from Warsaw!

This kind of parent suffers the pangs of a self-imposed Hell. Ashamed to admit to his son that be'tzeti mi-mitrayim, he blocks out his past -- and so blocks out the future as well, leaving his children dangling rootlessly in the swirling currents of life's fast moving stream. The WASP Father is a wilfull fool, and he begets

a ben tam, or as the Jerusalem Talmud calls him -- a ben tipesh, foolish son. Laugh not at him. Pity him instead.

But most troubling of all our Four Fathers is the last, whom we shall call the Democratic Father. This child of our times is not necessarily a bad Jew. Occasionally we find him to be observant of Judaism to a greater or lesser extent. But there is the rub -- Mr. Democratic Father, the very opposite of the Domin-eering Father to an absurd extreme, will not impose his own beliefs on his child -- even to the point of not informing the child what it is his father is not forcing on him. For Democratic Father is above all open-minded, and this is his special pride, his private and public conceit. His liberalism goes to the core of his being. He considers the family to be a democratic institution, over which he presides by the consent of his constituents whose duly appointed servant he is.

Democratic Father emphasizes the word "li" in the state-ment bavur zeh asah Ha-shem li ("because of this did the Lord do unto me") -- and as the Haggadah puts it, li ve'lo lo ("for me, but not for him"): I am bound by the Torah, but not my son. "Let my child choose by himself" is the triumphant cry of the Father who quite possibly grew up (as did so many of us) explaining his own youthful obnoxiousness by the slogan, "This is a free country." How these two slogans, taken in conjunction, symbolize a generation! "A free country" -- a noble political ideal corrupted to the anarchic rejection of duty: free to insult, free to be rude, free to ridicule

religion, country, and democracy itself, and ultimately free to burn and to loot.

So it is that Democratic Father presents no father-image to his children. He is only a "pal," hence a perpetual adolescent; and when his son grows up, he outgrows Democratic Father himself. Such a Father's li ve'lo lo is the ideal formula for raising a Rasha. And the Democratic Father is, for all his extravagant tolerance, a Rasha.

Of course, the Democratic Father is a fool before he is a scoundrel. His approach is utterly illogical and inconsistent. He does not allow his child to choose whether or not he will brush his teeth, go to school, steal from the fruit vendor, or become a professional beggar. But a way of life that will determine whether existence has meaning, whether he is rooted in history or not, whether morality is binding, whether hope and destiny are real or illusions -- this any child may choose for himself!

The charge that this father is more than illogical, that he is a kind of Rasha, is not invented by me; it is one pressed by the very same rebellious generation who are the sons and daughters of Democratic fathers and mothers -- but the term they use is "hypocrite." In the current issue of The American Scholar, one writer essays an interpretation of the remarkable revolt of the younger generation which seems to be gripping the entire world, including Red China; the explanation, however, really fits America more than any other society. Parents of the present generation, he

argues, have raised their children more permissively than ever before. Fundamentally, however, the parents themselves were raised with principles and the concepts of duty and obligation and a sense of right and wrong and of loyalty. So that for all their post-Freudian and pseudo-Freudian permissiveness, when the son does decide for himself in a manner that displeases the parent, Democratic Father suddenly puts his foot down -- something which has no meaning and no precedent in his child's life. "You can choose whatever way of life you want to," says Democratic Father. But when the son chooses the way of pot and acid, when he is a drop-out from the "good" school and dwells unwashed and unshorn in a pad instead of a home, when he goes down to the Hippie Village instead of rising up the ladder of success in the Secular City, Democratic Father attempts to stop him. No wonder the children are confused and cry "hypocrite." In the Haggadah's language, the Father liberally proclaims li ve'lo lo -- all this doesn't obligate you, son -- and then when the son behaves accordingly, Democratic Father reacts impulsively: hakheh et shinav -- even to blunting his teeth.

If the son of this kind of father is a Rasha -- so is the father. For Democratic Father has abdicated his family and societal obligations to the child -- and all of us are the poorer for it. As a permanent adolescent, this father projects his own childhood fantasies onto his son, and tries to relive through him a world without restraint or duty. When his son solemnly declares that anyone over thirty is not "with it" and is therefore an idiot, the Democratic

Father's residual infantilism is aroused. So he smiles tolerantly, determined to "be with it," and promptly clothes himself and Democratic Mother in garments and fashions that would embarrass an underdeveloped fifteen-year old.

The Democratic Father is so successful that his success is his undoing. His children feel no gratitude to him. They no longer speak the same language -- quite literally, for the rebellious youth has adopted the underworld jargon of the Negro slums. Learning no rules or standards from Democratic Father, this generation of his children is disposed to music that is mostly sheer volume, and its poetry possesses the elegant cadences and fine insights of a furious, bawling baby banging his fists on a high-chair. Its "religion" is that of narcotic excesses and psychedelic visions, and its priests are Gurus who are usually frauds. Its view of the world is narcissistic, and its way of life hysterical.

Of course, "wie es christelt sich, so jüdeln sich." Some Anglo-Jewish newspapers solemnly report statistical studies of High School children as if the results are the authoritative verdict on the state of Jewish religion. Is God alive? Ask the Jewish youths of the New Left. Is Torah relevant? Canvass the Hillel drop-outs on the Ivy League campuses. Is the Jewish sex-code outmoded? Lend an ear to the college home-coming symposia in Temples across the land.

One does not have to be a Victorian to recognize how dreadfully wrong the Democratic Father has been. At best he has raised a

Rasha; at worst, a Tam...

"Blessed is the Almighty, blessed is He. Blessed is He Who gave the Torah to His people Israel, blessed is He." Concerning Four Fathers did the Torah speak: one a Wise Father and one a WASP Father; one a Domineering Father and one a Democratic Father -- a bakham, a rasha, a tam, and a she'eino yodeia li'she'ol.

Have my words sounded a bit too frivolous here, a bit too sarcastic there? Perhaps; but the intention behind them is quite serious. For, truth to tell, by banim our Tradition means "people" and not necessarily children. And in a child-centered culture such as ours it is important to emphasize the Four Fathers as well as the Four Sons. For the Four Sons do ultimately grow up and become Fathers.

Parents must always sympathize and try to understand their children. But young people ought to develop the maturity to be sympathetic to the plight of their parents. No parent has all the answers. None of us is perfect. And all of us agonize over decisions on how to proceed with our children. We never really know if we are doing what is right; by the time we learn the answers it will be too late. We are beset by self-doubts and perplexities. It is no easier -- and quite possibly considerably more difficult -- to be a good parent than to be a good child.

In that delightful song with which we conclude the Seder, the Had Gadya, we read of the long chain of events initiated by one Father who bought a kid for just two bits. Fathers, unless they

choose to renounce their powers, can be quite influential and deserve our attention. For the entire drama of Father-Son relations, about which the Seder and Hagaddah revolve, leads up to the great vision set for us just as we entered this happy season. At the end of the Haftorah of Shabbat Hagadol, the Prophet Malachi proclaims the climax of the Messianic redemption of the future: "and he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers."

That remains our cherished goal: a reconciliation of the generations in mutual concern and affection and in reciprocal trust and respect.