

Favorite Son

Parshat Vayeshev, [Genesis 37:1-40:23](#)

Haftarah: [Amos 2:6-3:8](#)

Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben, Ph.D

Kehillat Israel Reconstructionist Congregation
Past President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California

There are moments when I suddenly glimpse the frightened, fragile child beneath the false bravado of an adult who has come to me for counseling, and my heart breaks with their pain and sadness. Indeed, there have been many moments when it seemed that the only response possible was to cry. This past week was one such moment.

A young woman named Kelly whom I had never met came to see me at the suggestion of a close friend who is a member of my congregation. She was troubled about something personal having to do with her family, and she wanted to speak with a rabbi.

When she came into the room, she seemed hard and tight, controlled and protected. She chose a strait-backed chair to sit in (eschewing the soft and comfortable couch which I had offered), and without introduction began to state her "problem," as if she were a clinician of some kind talking about someone else.

The issue at hand was her father's upcoming sixtieth birthday, and the strong negative feelings she had about flying to Chicago (her home town), showing up at the family gathering and participating in the celebration.

At first she only told me that she had a long history of "emotional distance" from her parents, that she and her father had really never gotten along, that she had an important business event she would rather attend, and that she just didn't feel any desire to be there "pretending" that she cared when she didn't. She claimed she was bringing this situation to me because one of the Ten Commandments is "honor your father and mother," and she wanted advice on whether she would be breaking this commandment if she didn't go to Chicago.

I sat quietly for a moment thinking before I responded to her question. There was something about what she was telling me that just didn't feel right. Her manner seemed too forced, the pitch of her voice too strained, and her emotions much too controlled.

So before I launched into a discussion of the Ten Commandments and the meaning of "Honor your father and mother," I quietly asked her instead, "What did your father do to you?" And after a long pause, slowly, almost silently at first, she began to cry.

For a while she just sat and cried, slowly shaking her head from side to side. Eventually she looked up at me through her tears and said simply, "My whole childhood he ignored

me.” And she began to share her memories of growing up in a family with a younger brother who was the apple of her father’s eye.

“All my father ever wanted to do was spend time with Jason,” she said bitterly. “He coached his soccer team and coached his baseball team and coached his football team and took tennis lessons with him and taught him how to scuba dive and it was just always the two of them together doing ‘boy’ things without me. And every year I would beg my father to take me to baseball games too, or take me to go skating on the lake, but he just couldn’t seem to find things that we could do together. Only dad and Jason.”

“So I just keep pulling farther and farther away emotionally and physically, which is why I ended up in California, and I guess I am still angry about it even now. Just thinking about being there with Jason at dad’s birthday party, knowing that whatever I do won’t be good enough and whatever he does will be ‘perfect’ makes me too sick to think about.”

I looked at this grown woman and saw only a terrified, lonely, emotionally abandoned child. And I cried as well. I cried for all her needless years of sorrow and suffering. I cried for how easy it was to crush her spirit and make her feel so worthless. And I cried for all the millions of children like Kelly whose hearts are broken every single day by parents who have no idea of the incredible power to destroy their children's self esteem that they hold in their hands.

I looked at Kelly and thought about this very week’s Torah portion, and the disturbing story of our patriarch Jacob and how he treats Joseph and his brothers. “And Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph the most of all his children because he was the son of old age to him. And he made him a coat of many colors. And his brothers saw that their father loved him the most. And they hated him.” (Genesis 37:3-4)

The Torah reminds us that it wasn’t because Jacob loved Joseph the most that he caused such emotional pain among his children (enough to inspire them to throw Joseph in a pit and sell him into slavery later in this week’s portion). What caused them such emotional suffering, feelings of shame, humiliation and anger, was that they “saw that their father loved him the most.” It wasn’t how he felt, but how he acted that mattered.

What matters most in life is not how you feel or what you think, but what you do. What matters most in parenting is how you act. James Baldwin once said, “Children have never been good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.” It’s the most profound insight into parenting that you will ever find. Children learn not only about life and relationships, but about themselves as well from how their parents act more than from what they say.