

## “Father of All”

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Based on Genesis 21:8-21; Luke 15:11-24

Today is Father’s Day, so I thought it would be fitting for us to think about fatherhood in biblical terms. There isn’t a single Bible verse that defines what a good father does, but in the Talmud, the central text for Judaism, which includes oral and written laws and commentaries, the duties and responsibilities of a good Jewish father were pretty simple. With regard to sons, fathers were required to circumcise them, to “redeem” them if they were firstborns, which basically means to pay money to the Temple so that they don’t have to dedicate their sons to the priesthood, to teach them the Torah, to ensure that they marry, to teach them trades, and according to some notes, to teach them how to swim as well. With regard to daughters, fathers were to provide them with clothing and all they need to get married.<sup>1</sup> There is nothing in the summary about a father needing to love his children or read them bedtime stories, nothing about teaching them how to ride a bike, balance a checkbook, defend themselves from danger, or be good spouses. This doesn’t mean that Jewish fathers in Old Testament times did not do the ancient equivalent of these things. Even in their patriarchal society with its clearly defined gender roles, it is likely that they did lots of things that weren’t on the Talmud’s list, like loving their children, and teaching them how to read the weather, deliver a lamb, recite the family’s history, and more. The Talmud’s list is the minimum, not the maximum a father had to do to be considered a good father.

Even recognizing that, however, I still wonder if Abraham would have behaved differently with his two sons if only he had had the list. (He didn’t; it was written hundreds of years after he died.) Abraham has long been considered the father of all nations, and the founding father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He was exemplary in his faithfulness to Yahweh, willing to head out into the unknown and believe the impossible was possible all because God promised to make everything work out well. But as we heard in this morning’s scripture lesson, Abraham was not an exemplary father either according to the very basic standards of the Talmud, or by our own. After wanting a son his whole life, he ended up at age one hundred, according to Scripture, with two: his firstborn son Ishmael, born to Sarah’s slave Hagar, and his second-born son, Isaac, born miraculously to Sarah herself in old age. You would think he would be thrilled and spend the rest of his days doting on them. But it wasn’t long after his sons were born that Abraham tried to kill them both.

Today’s text tells us the first time he did this was with his son Ishmael. If I were to preach on the Lectionary text next week, then we’d hear Isaac’s terrifying ordeal because they are back to back in *Genesis*. Neither story makes Abraham look good. You may not have caught what behavior prompted Abraham to send Ishmael and Hagar out into the wilderness with only enough water and food to last an afternoon or so because the play on words is in the Hebrew not the English. But basically, Ishmael’s “crime,” according to Sarah, was laughing. The text in

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<sup>1</sup> See Waxman, Chaim I., *The Jewish Father: Past and Present*, (New York: American Jewish Committee, Institute of Human Relations, 1984), 60, citing Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Kiddushin*, p. 29a); retrieved from <http://files.constantcontact.com/59fef7db001/1769b499-1772-4c53-bc4f-b93d4c8b4c7d.pdf?ver=1497626965000>.

Hebrew says she saw him “playing Isaac,” that is laughing, and that was enough for all her fears about Ishmael taking what should have been Isaac’s to blossom into a murderous jealousy because Isaac’s name meant “laughing boy.” “Get rid of the slave and her son,” Sarah said to Abraham, determined that her own laughing boy would be the beneficiary of God’s promises.

Now the text says that Abraham did not want to do this, but instead of telling her she was crazy and that he would never do such a thing to his son, he did what she asked. God assured him that he would look after Ishmael, so Abraham sent him and Hagar out into the desert. You can celebrate that as great faith in God’s provident care, but it still doesn’t earn him points in fathering in my book. Then of course the next story is about Abraham thinking that God wanted him to sacrifice the very son for whom he abandoned his firstborn. According to liberal branches of Judaism, God never asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and was horrified when Abraham almost went through with it. But that’s the subject of another day.

Building off of the shocking truth that both of Abraham’s sons grew up haunted by the knowledge that “their father had willingly sent them to the brink of death,” Rabbi Arthur Waskow of the Shalom Center in Philadelphia, imagined what Ishmael and Isaac might have said to each other when, according to *Genesis* 25, they finally were reunited years later at Abraham’s funeral. Ishmael says to Isaac:

“All these years, I’ve missed you. I only came to the Old Man’s funeral because I knew you would be here. As for the Old Man, I’ve feared and hated him. He would have let me die. And the way he treated my mother! ‘The Egyptian stranger,’ he called her. For that contempt, God tells me his offspring, your offspring, brother, must serve as strangers in the land of Egypt. May it be that from that service you will learn to know the heart of the stranger, as the Old Man never knew my mother’s heart!”

“And I’ve missed you,” Isaac replied. “I could never understand why you were ripped out of my life. I too, feared the Old Man, he would have literally killed me. I missed you, and I blamed you. I always thought that he took me to that mountain because he was filled with guilt over exiling you. He thought he had to treat us equally.”

“You blamed me! How amazing! For to tell the truth, I blamed you too. For your sake, your mother said, she had us exiled. All these years, we’ve turned our fear of the Old Man into distrust for each other. But now, thank God, we’ve reconnected! I would be honored if you would come to live with me a while.”

“That would be a blessing in my life.”<sup>2</sup>

*Genesis* records that Isaac settled by Beer-lahai-roi, “the Well-of-the-Living-One-Who-Sees-Me,” the well which God provided Hagar and Ishmael when they were dying of thirst in the wilderness. That tells us that whether or not this conversation actually took place, some kind of reconciliation did. The two sons, who had been pitted against each other from birth and treated as

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<sup>2</sup> Waskow, Arthur, “*Death and Reconciliation*,” THE SHALOM CENTER, Sept. 8, 2001; retrieved June 16, 2020 from <https://theshalomcenter.org/node/268>

disposable by Abraham, learned from their shared experience of his fathering how to set aside their differences and love one another. That is the happy ending to this father-sons story.

It is also an ending I want you to keep in mind as we consider the New Testament lesson today, another famous story about a father with two sons. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is so familiar it can be hard for us to set aside our preconceptions about what it means long enough to hear it anew. But today I want us to think about the Father in the story, not his better-known sons. The father behaves very differently from Abraham. He doesn't want to send away any son; he wants to bless and keep both of them. He wants this so badly that he is generous and loving to a fault. He overlooks his younger son's profound rudeness and greed in demanding his inheritance, granting him the freedom to be his own man. He forgives and welcomes that same son home with joy, even though he squandered everything. Yet he also loved his older son, telling him when his nose was out of joint about the welcome home party that "all that I have is yours." Although we don't know if the father ever taught his boys to swim or quote the Torah, it is clear from the text that he provided for and loved them in the extreme.

Some commentaries say that the father was weak because he didn't discipline his younger son properly, and/or that he was biased against or insensitive to his older son because he didn't throw him a party too. Some say the father broke social taboos in running out to meet his youngest or leaving his party to go talk to his eldest. Christians can psychologize this text any number of ways and have. But New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine, who is Jewish, says that many of those takes are laced with cultural misunderstanding and even anti-Semitism. The father in the story was not remarkable in doing any of these things, she insists. He just loved his children to the degree that he put them first, as a good father should.<sup>3</sup>

Levine then argues further that this text isn't really about the younger son's repentance, which is suspect anyway in the text, and it isn't really about party protocol and the laws of primogeniture. It's about reconciliation.<sup>4</sup> By not providing a full ending, the story asks us, "Will the sons be able to reach the point when they are no longer divided by jealousy and judgment because they realize that they are both equally loved and blessed?" The party was a celebration, not a funeral. But thinking about what happened to Ishmael and Isaac in the end makes me wonder whether these sons will bond at their father's funeral one day over the fact that their father's expectations drove them both crazy but his love healed their souls? Will they celebrate that he always listened to them even when they were out of line, or will they eye each other with suspicion and resentment? Will the elder son take care of the younger son who squandered his share of the inheritance, or will the younger son try to take more of what was his brothers? We don't know. But it's pretty clear that the Father in this story would have wanted them to be reconciled. The father loved them both.

In Christian tradition, regardless of whether we see ourselves more in the younger son or the elder, we all are supposed to see God as the Father in this story. As God provided for both Isaac and Ishmael, making them each beneficiaries of the covenant God made with Abraham, so God provides for both of the sons in this story. No one is disowned for bad behavior. No one is

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<sup>3</sup> Levine, Amy-Jill, The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi: Short Stories by Jesus (HarperCollins Pub., 2014), 48-76.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 73-76.

deprived of God's blessing and love. That is the challenge of this story. To affirm that God is the Father is to affirm that God loves the siblings who stand for everything we stand against. To affirm that God is the Father is to affirm that God loves all of God's children and wants us to love each other too.

In recent years, for many good reasons, the Church has focused on the problems with using Father language for God. God is not male, and using "Father" all the time to address God leads people to believe that God is. Then they bring with that term all of their preconceptions about what a Father is and is not, leaving some people deeply comforted and other people horrified depending on whether their own fathers were good or not. It can also be equally problematic to affirm God as Father, if that leads people to believe that God the Father really did what Abraham tried to do, sacrificing his son. It's not the same situation at all because Jesus was actually God, so God was really sacrificing Godself. Anyway, it all gets confusing and mixed up with our own baggage justifiably or unjustifiably so.

But both of today's texts illustrate what the author of *Ephesians* affirms, there is "one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (Eph. 4:6). And although I wouldn't recommend using Father language for God exclusively, there is value in using it sometimes, beyond the fact that Jesus addressed God this way. The value comes from our recognizing what these texts teach us, that even if we have father-issues, we all have a good father in God, and because we all have a good father, we must be reconciled with our siblings.

That last lesson is the tough one. It means that those who are looking for a divine Father who will, like Abraham, cast out some of humanity into the wilderness to die a painful death, or who will sacrifice some others because our theology demands it, are going to be disappointed. Our God will not play favorites that way. It means that we have to accept that in the same way God said "the blessing will flow through Isaac," and then turned around and made a second blessing that would flow through Ishmael, in the same way that the Father in the parable gave his inheritance to both the "good" and the "bad" sons, God our Father deals out love, not based upon merit or lineage, but based upon the fact that we are God's children and God delights in us all.

Does that make for a happy ending? That remains to be seen. Ishmael and Isaac were able to come together bonded by a shared hate. For some it may be harder to come together because of being blessed by the same love. But this much is clear from the texts: you cannot proudly claim God as your Father and then say in good faith that your Father has disowned or rejected "those people." So, it is up to us to figure out how to love them as our Father does. Our family is filled with prodigals who squander God's blessings and with good, hardworking children who don't ask for much and often feel ignored. It includes people who were born into privilege and those who were born into lower social status and even slavery through none of their own doing. We can allow jealousy and competitiveness and judgmentalism to divide us. But that just perpetuates our suffering and our Father's pain. The better course for all of us therefore, is to come together united by the knowledge that our Father is generous to a fault, and wants nothing more than for all of us to live and thrive and feast together in joy and peace. May the Spirit help us in this endeavor now and always. Amen.