

## Being Abba: A Civilizational Text Study

### Biblical

וַאֲמַר אֲלֵכֶם לֹא-תִעַרְצוּן וְלֹא-תִירָאוּן מֵהֵם: יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הֵהָלֵךְ לִפְנֵיכֶם הוּא יִלְחַם לָכֶם כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֶתְכֶם בְּמִצְרַיִם לְעֵינֵיכֶם: וּבַמִּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאָדָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשְׂאֵאִישׁ אֶת-בְּנוֹ בְּכָל-הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר הִלַכְתֶּם עַד-בְּאֶחָם עַד-הַמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה:

Then I said to you, Dread not, nor be afraid of them. The Lord your God who goes before you, he shall fight for you, according to all what he did for you in Egypt before your eyes; And in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, like a man carries his son, in all the way that you went, until you came to this place.

*Deuteronomy 1:29-31*

שְׁמְעוּ בָנִים מוֹסֵר אָב וְהִקְשִׁיבוּ לְדַעַת בִּינָה: כִּי לְקַח טוֹב נָתַתִּי לָכֶם תּוֹרָתִי אֶל-תִּעְזֹבוּ: כִּי-בֶן הָיִיתִי לְאָבִי רַךְ וְיָחִיד לִפְנֵי אִמִּי: וְיִרְנִי וַיֹּאמֶר לִי יִתְמָךְ-דָּבְרִי לְבָד שְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתַי וְחַיֵּה: קִנְיָה חֻכְמָה קִנְיָה בִּינָה אֶל-תִּשְׁכַּח וְאֶל-תֵּט מֵאִמְרֵי-פִי: אֶל-תִּעְזֹבָהּ וְתִשְׁמָרָהּ אֶהְבֶּהָ וְתִצְרָף: רֵאשִׁית חֻכְמָה קִנְיָה חֻכְמָה וּבְכָל-קִנְיָנָה קִנְיָה בִּינָה: סִלְסֵלָהּ וּתְרוֹמְמָהּ תִּכְבְּדָהּ כִּי תַחֲבֹקֶנָה: תִּתֵּן לְרֵאשִׁיף לְוִית-חַן עֲטֹרַת תִּפְאָרֶת תִּמְגְּנָהּ:

Hear, you children, the instruction of a father, and attend to know understanding. For I give you good doctrine, do not forsake my Torah. For I was my father's son, tender and the only one in the sight of my mother. He taught me also, and said to me, Let your heart retain my words; keep my commandments, and live. Get wisdom, acquire understanding; forget it not; nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Forsake her not, and she shall preserve you; love her, and she shall keep you. The beginning of Wisdom is: Get Wisdom; therefore use all your means to acquire understanding. Exalt her, and she shall promote you; she shall bring you to honor, when you embrace her. She shall give to your head an ornament of grace; a crown of glory shall she bestow on you.

*Proverbs 4:1-9*

### Rabbinic

תנינא להא דת"ר: האב חייב בבנו למולו, ולפדותו, וללמדו תורה, ולהשיאו אשה, וללמדו אומנות וי"א: אף להשיטו במים

We thus learnt [here] what our Rabbis taught: The father is bound in respect of his son, to circumcise, redeem, teach him Torah, take a wife for him, and teach him a craft. Some say, to teach him to swim too  
*Kiddushin 29a*

פילוסופוס אחד שאל את רבי הושעיה א"ל אם חביבה היא המילה מפני מה לא נתנה לאדם הראשון א"ל מפני מה אותו האיש מגלח פאת ראשו ומניח את פאת זקנו א"ל מפני שגדל עמו בשטות א"ל אם כן יסמא את עינו ויקטע את ידיו וישבר את רגליו על ידי שגדלו עמו בשטות א"ל ולאלין מיליא אתינן אתמהא א"ל להוציאך חלק אי אפשר אלא כל מה שנברא בששת ימי בראשית צריכין עשייה כגון החרדל צריך למתוק התורמוסים צריך למתוק החיטין צריכין להטחן אפילו אדם צריך תיקון

A pagan philosopher asked R. Hoshai [Oshaia]: If circumcision is so beloved [of God], why was the mark of circumcision not given to Adam at his creation? R. Hoshai replied: According to your reasoning, why should a man like you shave the hair of his head [with which he was born], but at the same time leave the adult hair of his beard intact?1 The pagan sage replied: Because the hair of his head grew with him in the days of his foolish childhood. Rabbi Hoshai then argued: If so, he should blind his eyes, lop off his hands, and break his legs, which also grew along with him since the days of his foolish childhood. The philosopher exclaimed: Have we come down to such drivel? R. Hoshai replied: I cannot let you go

without a proper answer. So observe that everything that was created during the six days of creation needs finishing: mustard needs sweetening, vetches [green plants] need sweetening, wheat needs grinding, and even man needs finishing.

*Genesis Rabah XI:6*

והמדריך בניו ובנותיו בדרך ישרה, והמשיאן סמוך לפירקון, עליו הכתוב אומר: וידעת כי שלום אהלך

To the one who guides his or her sons and daughters in the right path . . . to that person does the verse apply 'And you shall know that there is peace in your tent

*Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 62b*

### **Medieval**

You know, my son, how I swaddled you and brought you up, how I led you in the paths of wisdom and virtue. I fed and clothed you; I spent myself in educating and protecting you. I sacrificed my sleep to make you wise beyond your fellows and to raise you to the highest degree of science and morals. These twelve years I have denied myself the usual pleasures and relaxations of men for your sake, and I still toil for your inheritance. [After the death of his wife the father devoted his time to Samuel, his son.]

I have honored you by providing an extensive library for your use, and have thus relieved you of the necessity to borrow books....

My son! I command you to honor your wife to your utmost capacity. She is intelligent and modest, a daughter of a distinguished and educated family. She is a good housewife and mother, and no spendthrift. Her tastes are simple, whether in food or dress. Remember her assiduous tendance of you in your illness, though she had been brought up in elegance and luxury. Remember how she afterwards reared your son without man or woman to help her...If you would acquire my love, honor her with all your might; do not exercise too severe an authority over her; our Sages [Gittin 6b] have expressly warned men against this. If you give orders or reprove, let your words be gentle. Enough is it if your displeasure is visible in your look; let it not be vented in actual rage. Let your expenditure be well ordered. It is remarked in the *Choice of Pearls* [1: 3] "Expenditure properly managed makes half an income." And there is an olden proverb: "Go to bed without supper and rise without debt." Defile not the honor of your countenance by borrowing; may the Creator save you from that habit! ....

*The Ethical Will of Judah in Tibbon, France 1160*

These are the things which my sons and daughters shall do at my request. They shall go to the house of prayer morning and evening, and shall pay special regard to the *tefillah* [the "Eighteen Benedictions"] and the *shema* [Deuteronomy 6:4]. So soon as the service is over, they shall occupy themselves a little with the Torah [the Pentateuch], the Psalms, or with works of charity. Their business must be conducted honestly, in their dealings both with Jew and Gentile. They must be gentle in their manners and prompt to accede to every honorable request. They must not talk more than is necessary; by this will they be saved from slander, falsehood, and frivolity. They shall give an exact tithe of all their possessions: they shall never turn away a poor man empty-handed, but must give him what they can, be it much or little. If he beg a lodging over night, and they know him not, let them provide him with the wherewithal to pay an innkeeper. Thus shall they satisfy the needs of the poor in every possible way....

I earnestly beg my children to be tolerant and humble to all, as I was throughout my life. Should cause for dissension present itself, be slow to accept the quarrel; seek peace and pursue it with all the vigor at your command. Even if you suffer loss thereby, forbear and forgive, for God has many ways of feeding and sustaining His creatures. To the slanderer do not retaliate with counterattack; and though it

be proper to rebut false accusations, yet is it most desirable to set an example of reticence. You yourselves must avoid uttering any slander, for so will you win affection. In trade be true, never grasping at what belongs to another. For by avoiding these wrongs-scandal, falsehood, money-grubbing-men will surely find tranquillity and affection. And against all evils, silence is the best safeguard  
*The Ethical Will of Eleazar of Mayence, 1357*

### **Modern**

If a child is to keep alive his (or her) inborn sense of wonder, he (or she) needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him (or her) the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.”

*Rachel Carson, The Sense of Wonder [New York: Harper & Row, 1956]*

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

*Martin Luther King, Jr.*

### **Contemporary**

When I was 16, my father, a man who very rarely spoke to me, came into my bedroom and handed me Theodor Herzl’s *The Jewish State*. He said, “This is what it’s all about.” And then he walked out. That moment, combined with the years of silently watching him do business, interact with people, taught me something about being a man; about being a Jewish man. He taught me to always be proud of the fact that I was Jewish: this meant always standing up for myself when confronted by people who had less than honorable opinions about Jews, supporting Israel, and remembering that my people are my greatest connection to history. He taught me to conduct myself with honesty in business – to be open, tolerant, and provide the best work possible. He taught *tzedaka* – to always give to those who needed even if they refused to ask. He even taught me how to hunt, fish, and wash a car. He taught me “how to swim,” so to speak. And although the rabbis would not have been too happy with the hunting lessons, I know I benefited. Yes there are no great words of Torah that depart from his lips, there are no lessons in *Mishnah*, but there are moments fraught with behavior deemed honorable by the Torah, lessons in life that leave a legacy.

If the obligations for a Jewish father rest far beyond traditional norms, beyond Torah, which we have relegated to our rabbis and Hebrew schools; and trade which we have relegated to our colleges and other professionals; then there is still room in the modern setting for successful Jewish fathering. Modern Jewish fathering relies heavily on “swimming”; it may require a departure, but not a complete dismissal of the role as defined through prayer, Jewish education, and community involvement. Perhaps it’s the simple melding of the two – secular activity which highlights positive Jewish behavior – which is the essence of the modern Jewish father. It is the moment when the young son sees his father standing above him late at night which gives Rosenfeld’s lament as *yiddishe tatte*, Jewish father, its modern twist. It is the ability of a father to take his children by the hand and lead them into experiences that will mold, guide, and ultimately change their lives. It requires a father to silently say the *She’cheianu* whenever he is with his child – to bless every moment and bring Torah and life together.

*Michael Geller, Achim Magazine. Fall, 2002*