

They call me the *prodigal* son - and that's downright unfair. I was no more a great sinner than my older brother was a great saint. So on this Father's Day listen to the story from my point of view. Listen to the story of a Jewish boy who grew up in a Jewish village. To begin at the beginning.

"A certain man had two sons". We were brothers and like brothers the world over we were very different. Indeed if you have a brother I hazard the guess that you are very different from him. My brother was the farmer. It's all he ever did. Up at the crack of dawn to milk the cows, then up the lane out into the meadow. At 6 o'clock at night back came the cows, down the lane, into the byre for the evening milking. And in between checking the cattle, feeding the goats, plowing and harvesting the fields according to the season. Seven days a week . Sixty five days in the year. That's the life of a farmer - and I *hated* it. When my brother looked at the horizon he wondered about the weather. When I looked at the horizon I wondered what lay beyond it. I wondered about different people, with different customs, different dress and different foods. Tell me, would you be satisfied with a life where your greatest excitement is the price of a steer at the cattle market? Would you? Anyhow I was determined to break away.

So one day I bit the bullet. I went to my father and I said to him: "Father, give me the portion of the goods that falleth to me". Never, never will I forget, not until the sun shrivels up and the moon turns to blood, never will I forget the look of shock and pain on my father's face. I had said to him: "Why don't you drop dead, old man. I wish you were gone". It was a terrible thing to say and nowhere in my Hebrew scriptures is there a single instance of a son ever saying such a thing to his father. Indeed there is not a single example of it in all the ancient literature of the Middle East from Syria to modern Arabia. Its assumptions are distasteful, its motives disrespectful, its implications improper. My father was deeply wounded, and when my mother heard of it she wept as though her heart would break. But my father put his arm round her and said: "We give our children their roots. We must also give them their wings". And when he went down to sit with the elders of the village at the gate as was his wont, and heard them vowing to whip me out of the village for the scandal I had caused, he took my side, he stood up for me his willful son - and that was pretty remarkable. He said something like this: "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you. You may house their bodies but not their souls...You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth...Let your bending in the Archer's bow be for gladness; For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves the bow that is stable". In a very traditional society my father knew how to bend. He was a remarkable father.

Now I had to go. I said an awkward goodbye and started off down the long unknown road that led from our house. I only once looked back. My father was standing on the porch watching. I had the feeling he would stand there every evening. But I didn't really think too much about it. I was bound for a new life in a new land. Do you blame me for leaving? Let me ask you this. What do you think of the brothers Bartholomew and Diego Colombo? I think nothing because you never heard of them. They were stay at home boys. But they had another brother who left the old homestead and went in search of a new world. His name was Christopher and the family name was changed to Columbus. And each year you honour this man who dared to go beyond the horizon. Why do you not give me credit for also leaving?

What was it like? I'll tell you. I felt free, free - like a bird that had finally risked leaving the nest. I saw new sights. I made new friends. I attended many a party. I kissed many a girl. After all I was young. I lived!! Despite what my older brother said I was not just a party boy. I also worked hard. I had capital and I had ideas. My business grew month by month and year by year. The world was my oyster. "Blue skies smiling at me/ Nothing but blue skies did I see".

And then one day - it was a Tuesday - the market crashed. The next day it steadied and everybody heaved a sigh of relief. But come Thursday it plummeted again and on Friday I was wiped out. You know how it is. Of course my friends were in the same boat. The only job I could get was tending pigs in a Gentile country. They eat pigs. Worse than the hunger was the shame I began to feel. I had lost the family inheritance and lost it to Gentiles. I had disgraced the family name. And that was a terrible thing in my tradition. Even then I didn't pity myself. I didn't whine. "I came to myself" which means I decided to take some action. I would go back home, I would go to my father and say unto him, "Father I have failed in the sight of heaven and before thee. I am no more worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of the hired servants". My father lost his son when I left and now I would lose my father when I returned.

I knew what would happen in that situation. The Kizazah! Do you know about it? According to custom an earthenware pot would be filled with nuts, raisins and burnt corn. My mother could come and give me a last kiss, but my father would stay indoors and hide his face in shame. And on the front porch before all the village the pot would be broken with the cry: "This man is cut off from his people". They called it the Kizazah ceremony and a terrible thing it is. I think it is like the "Shun" of your Pennsylvania Dutch. I would then live apart from the household in the village until full restitution had been made. Not as a son, not even as a servant. I would be apart from all the household for many years.

It was a very long journey home with loneliness and shame my only companions. But one day there it was in the distance the homestead. I kept going until I was near enough. And then I saw my father standing on the porch watching for me. He was more bowed than I remembered and I saw him before he saw me. His eyesight was failing as happens with age. But then he saw me. And I will never forget what happened next. You miss it because your culture is different from mine. He started running to meet me. Yes, I said "running". In the East the patriarch never runs. To run you must hitch up your robe and expose your bare legs. That is shameful. The dignity in which the patriarch is held means that he sits or occasionally stands. Just as a Queen in your society sits on her throne. Running isn't just undignified. It is a rejection of status and authority and rank. But my father did it out of love for his wilful son. That was remarkable. I never saw such a thing happen before or since. But that day my father "ran and fell on my neck and kissed me. And he said to his servants: Bring forth the best robe and put it on him; and put a ring on his fingers and shoes on his feet". I tried to speak, but my father would have none of it. Remarkable.

You see the robe restored me to the village leaders. The ring restored me to the community. And shoes restored me to the household. Slaves go barefoot but "all God's chillun got shoes". I had shoes. It didn't stop there. My father planned a mammoth party. Now ours is a poor country and a hot one. Food must be eaten immediately. So if you have a few friends in for dinner you may kill a chicken. If it is a wedding you might kill a goat. My father went a step further. He slew a calf and the whole village was invited. There must have been 200 people there. He was a remarkable father. So that is my story. Listen!! - in a way it is not a story about me or my older brother.. It is a story about a remarkable father.

But let me add one thing. My Jewish tradition differs from yours in two ways. We have no saints. We recognize that everyone gets lost at some time. I did. Maybe you did too. And we have no creeds. The faith that we have shared for thousands of years is expressed not in confessions and creeds but in stories - The story of a man in an ark whom God remembered. The story of a man who heard a voice which said: "Let my people go".

And in my story I wonder if my remarkable father could be a likeness to the Father of us all - a God who breaks all the rules, who willingly gives up his status and his dignity out of an unbelievable love for a wayward son. It seems to me that the traditional God in both our religions punishes those who fail to make the grade. Listen to these words from my tradition: "Let burning coals fall upon them. Let them be cast into the fire that they rise not up again". And from your tradition: "On the day of judgment heaven and earth will be consumed by fire and the ungodly will perish". The greatest question in your religion and mine, indeed in all religions, is the nature of the Father above. Is it damnation and hell? Does he cast the sinner out? Many today think so. But not me! My father threw his arms around me, and welcomed me home, killed the fatted calf, and shouted for joy: "This my son was dead and is alive again: he was lost and is found.

In closing allow me to borrow something from your tradition. Four lines which go like this: "Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; 'Twas grace that brought me safe thus far, And grace that brought me home". And on this Father's Day I would like to give you a blessing from my tradition. As Hebrews we have always stood for prayer. We still do. And in your Presbyterian tradition you did too until a very short time ago. However I am told that some Episcopalians have infiltrated your company. They kneel for prayer. Strange! Do you think these Episcopalians are rather odd?! So we are going to stand in a moment and say three sentences. Listen to the first: "Baruch Adonai" (which means 'blessed be the Lord'). The second is "Baruch Avi" ('blessed be my father'). And the third is "Baruch Avi, ha kavved" which means 'blessed be my father, whom I honour'. We should surely say 'blessed be my father whom I honour' - whether our father is still with us or has passed within the veil. Remember the blessing: Baruch Adonai, Baruch Avi, Baruch Avi Ha Kavved. Let's stand a say it with all our hearts on this Father's Day.