

“And These Are the Generations”: A Patriarch’s Legacy and the Importance of Family

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Thanksgiving is a major holiday in my family.

It’s the one time in the year when all of us—my parents and, while they were living, my grandparents; my brother and sister-in-law and nephew; my aunts, uncles, and cousins—get together in the same place for a few hours to eat, relax, reminisce, and check in with each other about what’s going on in our lives.

The core of the family is still in Texas, and the rest of us are scattered around the country. But on Thanksgiving Day—most of us, anyway—we’re all at my aunt and uncle’s house in Austin.

It’s a tradition that goes back 34 years.

We generally all had Thanksgiving together before then, too. But it all changed in 1988.

In August of that year, my grandmother Lois died suddenly from a heart attack.

My grandfather Lou couldn’t bear the idea of hosting Thanksgiving in their house, as usual, without her just a few months later, so his children decided it would be a good idea to give him a change of scenery and move Thanksgiving to Austin.

It made sense anyway, because the Texas Longhorns always played the Texas A&M Aggies on Thanksgiving night at the time, and that would enable us to go to the game together as a family after dinner—which, in order to make the game in time, had to happen around 2:30 or 3 in the afternoon at the latest.

So, when I was 15 and my brother was 11, we started an annual tradition of making the two-and-a-half-hour drive from Houston to Austin early on Thanksgiving morning, playing some football together in the front yard, eating a delicious Thanksgiving meal prepared mostly by my grandfather, watching the Dallas Cowboys game on TV, and then heading over to Memorial Stadium to watch the Horns battle the Aggies.

It was a truly wonderful experience. We all looked forward to it every year—no one more than me. We have so many stories from those Thanksgivings over the years that live on in family lore—and we love to retell them year after year, and laugh about the great football debates, and the off-color moments, and my grandfather’s unforgettable one-liners.

But then, of course, things started to change.

I went off to college—and then my brother and my cousin a few years later.

And eventually we graduated and moved away so we had to fly in, which became more expensive.

At some point along the way, the Longhorns and the Aggies stopped playing each other on Thanksgiving night—and then stopped playing each other at all.

And my dad and my brother were allergic to my aunt’s dog anyway, so instead of staying overnight we started driving back to Houston after dinner—making it a pretty long day of driving.

In time, spouses joined the family and children were born.

But through all of this change, our tradition endured.

Come Thanksgiving week, we packed up our car seats and strapped them to our backs and headed to the airport.

On Thanksgiving morning, we put our infants in the car and drove up to Austin, sometimes with them screaming the whole way.

But no matter what it took to get there, come Thursday afternoon we were all standing there in a circle in my aunt's living room, going around to each say what we're thankful for, and introduce the new significant other, or the new baby, and talk about our upcoming move, or our exciting new job, or whatever was going on in our lives that year.

My family has been deeply loyal to this tradition, even when life gets in the way.

This year, as it happens, is only the second time in 34 years it hasn't happened.

The realities of life and aging made it impossible to travel and be there together yesterday. So, we did it on Zoom instead.

We've upheld this tradition year after year because we care about each other, and we enjoy being together.

And most importantly, we've done it to honor our matriarch and patriarch, Lois and Lou, who taught us that family is the most important thing and left us a legacy of love—and a lot of great memories to reminisce and laugh about, too.

I often wonder: Who will carry on the tradition in the next generation? As time goes by and we become further removed from each other, it will become harder.

Our parashah this week, Toldot, comes around every year at just the right time.

It begins: "*V'eileh toldot Yitzhak*—and these are the generations of Isaac" (Gen. 25:19).

Why "*And these are the generations...*"?

Because right before it, at the end of the previous portion, the Torah lists out the generations of Ishmael—Isaac's half-brother and Abraham's first-born child.

We know the story of Ishmael.

Abraham and Sarah couldn't have children for a long time, so Sarah suggested that Abraham try to conceive with his maid, Hagar.

And he did. And Ishmael was born.

But then—surprising exactly no one—Sarah regretted encouraging her husband to sleep with Hagar. And when Sarah finally gave birth to Isaac, she gave Abraham an ultimatum: Send Hagar and Ishmael away, or else.

Abraham wasn't sure what to do. He loved Ishmael; he didn't want to send him away, and he was terrified for his son's future. But God told him it would be OK. God would watch out for Hagar and her son, and one day Ishmael would become the father of a great nation, too.

So, at Abraham's instruction, Hagar and Ishmael went their own way, and the two branches of Abraham's family grew up separately, in different places and not in good touch, to say the least.

But here's where that all-important "*And*" at the beginning of our parashah comes in.

The *Me'or Einayim*, an 18th-century Hasidic commentary, says the "*And*" is there to remind us—and *them*—that, despite their estrangement, despite their very different paths in life, despite whatever fallings out there were between them, the generations of Isaac and the generations of Ishmael are still and forever *family*.

"These are the generations of Ishmael...*And* these are the generations of Isaac."

They may have been separated by distance, by painful family dynamics, by religious beliefs, and even by chapter and parashah breaks in the Torah—but none of that changes the fact that they share a common patriarch who, though he made plenty of mistakes, did the best he knew how to raise them and leave them a legacy worth honoring.

I think this is not just the story of one family; it is, in a sense, a story about *all* families.

Many families go through trying times that strain their relationships.

Over the course of a family's collective life, there may be conflicts and hurt feelings and tensions that make it feel too hard to overcome, too unpleasant to come together again, too much work to mend.

It's far easier to avoid the discomfort by just avoiding *them*. And so, we do.

Other families may not have these kinds of schisms or tensions, but as time passes and the generations multiply and disperse, our connections with our family start to fray just by attrition.

We all love and care about each other, to be sure. But the inertia of the day-to-day is so strong and it's really easy to lose touch—not intentionally, but because it's true that when people are out of sight, it's easy for them to slip out of mind.

To me, it's the call of the Torah not to let that happen: not to let our families drift apart for lack of effort, and not to let them fall apart because of conflict or bad feelings.

In the Kabbalah, Abraham, the family patriarch, is the paragon of *chesed* and *ahavah*—meaning kindness and love—because of his gracious hospitality and his undying devotion to God.

But, tragically, because of his own bad choices—like sending one son out to fend for himself in the wilderness and almost sacrificing the other one on top of a mountain—his children and their subsequent generations became estranged from him and from each other.

But the *Me'or Einayim* teaches that it's our responsibility to honor and elevate the good things about Abraham's legacy—his abounding love and generosity and kindness—for future generations.

We can do that by taking that "*And*" seriously and remembering that—no matter where we disperse to, no matter what has transpired between us over the years, no matter how different we might be, no matter how

unintentionally we may let the days and years go by without making an effort—our family is still and always will be our *family*.

It's true that sometimes—like when there's been abuse—relationships are so broken or toxic that it may not be possible to find a path forward without causing severe spiritual and emotional harm to ourselves or to the ones we love.

In many circumstances, though, the fissures in our families, painful though they may be, can be repaired if we are willing to reach out and sincerely try to reconcile.

Sadly, Ishmael and Isaac waited until Abraham died to finally come back together.

This is something I see all the time: people holding on to their grudges or just not going out of their way to be present with their parents or grandparents or siblings until there's a funeral.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

We can make the effort now to honor Abraham's legacy of *chesed* and *ahavah* by showing *chesed* and *ahavah* to our own families, even when it's hard or inconvenient to do.

It will take work.

But as my grandfather taught me, there's really nothing more important than this.