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Bread Givers: The Richness of Ambivalence

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In 1925, Anzia Yezierska published a largely autobiographical novel, in which she developed the theme of a young woman's struggles to be a part of the larger American world while not severing her ties to her parents and to their European values. Her novel is rich with pain, insight, and pride. Like The Rise of David Levinsky and Call It Sleep, Bread Givers derives its considerable power from its ambivalence toward Judaism and America. Rather than simply writing a paean to American values (as did Mary Antin in The Promised Land) or a tirade against Old-World Ways, Yezierska lets us understand the conflicting priorities--and therefore the tensions--with which a Jewish immigrant had to live.

This tension is presented, in concrete immediacy, as "a struggle between a father of the Old World and a daughter of the New". The story begins in the home of the Smolinsky family--a pious and unbending father who spends his days studying Jewish holy books, a wife who works to support her husband and children, and four girls. In the course of the novel, the girls each experience a romance which their father destroys. He sees this form of love as violating a cardinal principle within Judaism, that of honoring one's father. For Moishe Smolinsky, that honor implies that he select his daughters' mates, and that they pay him for the privilege of marrying one of his daughters. After watching the lives of the three older girls ruined by her

father's intransigence, Sara, the youngest, decides to run away and become a school teacher. She supports herself by working at a factory as she takes the college preparatory program at a night school, then attends a suburban college. At the end of her college experience, she wins an essay contest for \$1000. Returning to New York, Sara sets herself up in an apartment and visits her mother, whom she has not seen for six years. Her mother is on her deathbed.

After her mother's death, Sara's father remarries. The remainder of the plot deals with Sara's ability to reconcile herself to her father and his values. She also becomes romantically involved with Hugo Seelig, the principal of her school.

The key to this novel's power is the gradual heightening and ultimate resolution of Sara's ambivalence to her father and to her Jewishness. Too much of an individual to submit to the dictates of either, she is simultaneously aware of how, in a transformed way, she is their truest emodiment in the New World.

Because of Sara's similarity to her father, she is the child most in conflict with him. And, paradoxically, because she is the child most like Moisheh, she is able, at the novel's conclusion, to make her peace with her father and with the tradition he embodies.

Her father deeply resented not having a son:

Always Father was throwing up to Mother that she had borne him no son to be an honour to his days and to say prayers for him when he died (?)

Throughout the book, her father's male-oriented theology is

presented as the basic theme of traditional religion:

The prayers of his daughters didn't count because God didn't listen to women. Heaven and the next world were only for men. Women could get into Heaven because they were wives and daughters of men. Women had no brains for the study of God's Torah, but they could be the servants of men who studied the Torah. Only if they cooked for the men, and washed for the men, and didn't nag or curse the men out of their homes; only if they let the men study the Torah in peace, then, maybe, they could push themselves into Heaven with the men, to wait on them there (10).

This theology was only the context in which Sara's conflict with her father was couched. The generative source of their struggle was their faith in conflicting salvations (Torah v. America) and their similar personalities. Both individuals knew clearly what they wanted, and both refused to deviate in the least from their chosen goal. So, Moisheh brought all of his sacred books with him to America, and refused his wife's request to bring so much as a pot, claiming there was no room. Despite the fact that America did not value traditional Jewish learning, Moisheh insisted on studying all day, as he had in the Old Country. Beyond that, he continued to perceive his study as being of value not merely to himself, but to the family and neighborhood as well. Moisheh is working to "spread the light of the Holy Torah (46)," he is "the light of the block, the one man who holds up the flame of the Holy Torah before America (48)." He consistently construes the world to fit his world view. When Berel Bernstein says he wants to marry Bessie, Moisheh asks rhetorically whether she will earn a higher place in heaven supporting Berel or himself. It does not occur to Moisheh to view a situation from any other perspective save his own.

And yet, for all his obstinacy, there is tremendous appeal

and charisma in Moisheh Smolinsky. Despite his difficult obstinacy, he has the respect and devotion of his daughters and wife.

At Father's touch Mother's sad face turned into smiles. His kind look was like the sun shining on her (11).

That devotion springs from his daughters as well: "All faces turned to Father. Eyes widened, necks stretched, ears strained not to miss a word (11)." Yet, even in this introductory scene, the reader sees the ambivalence of the entire family to its central figure. As soon as his story ends, the fight re-emerges, with Moisheh insisting that he, as the sole head of the family, should not be bothered with material problems.

His daughters share their mother's devotion. In speaking to Berel Bernstein, Bessie tells him, "I couldn't leave my father. He needs me. . . . I couldn't marry a man that don't respect my father (51)." However, after Moisheh intervenes with both Bessie and with Mashah to end their romances (which both daughters accept), Sara is finally able to articulate the other dimension of her ambivalence:

More and more I began to see that Father, in his innocent craziness to hold up the Light of the Law to his children, was as a tyrant more terrible than the Tsar from Russia (65).

Unlike all the other girls, Sara speaks out. She screams back at her father, she takes a quarter and sets up a business to feed the family, she even speaks up in defense of her sisters.

At first, her ambivalence was itself a source of guilt and pain. But she quickly makes peace with it, treating her inner life as a fact of nature, something to accept and adjust to:

I too was frightened the first time I felt I hated my father. I felt like a criminal. But could I help it what was inside

of me? I had to feel what I felt even if it killed me (45). Sara's willingness to live honestly with her own needs and her insistence on the validity of her own perception is the direct heir of her father's own self-perception. During the fight with her father when she announces she is leaving him to live on her own, Sara repeatedly equates the two of them implicitly in her language: "You made the lives of the other children! I'm going to make my own life (138)" As with her father, her first joy in the world is her books. And, like her father, she gives her books precedence over relationships. When her mother comes to visit her and asks Sara to do the same, Sara responds that her studies don't leave any time for visits. In fact, it will be six years before she sees her mother again, and that will be at her mother's death bed. Her sisters astutely comment that "She's worse than Father with his Holy Torah (178)." Like her father, Sara finds life's meaning in learning: upon rejecting a wealthy suitor because he did not appreciate knowledge, she reflects:

I looked at the books on my table that had stared at me like enemies a little while before. They were again the life of my life. Ach! Nothing was so beautiful as to learn, to know, to master by the sheer force of my will even the dead squares and triangles of geometry. I seized my books and hugged them to my breast as though they were living things (201).

Immediately following that perception, Sara realizes just how similar to her father she really is. "He had given up worldly success to drink the wisdom of the Torah. He would tell me that, after all, I was the only daughter of his faith (202)." Or, again, "I had it from Father, this ingrained something in me that would not let me take the mess of pottage (202)."

Tragically, the ambivalent nature of their relationship does

not permit this celebration of learning. Her father is locked into the specifics of his world view no less than is she. He does not, on a conscious level, distinguish between form and content--Torah learning is unlike all other types of learning. Moisheh makes a point of visiting Sara in order to disown her--precisely because she refused a proposal of marriage in order to continue learning.

This incident teaches Sara yet another point she shares with her father, this time a negative trait: "All my selfishness is from you (207)." Again treating her emotions as immovable forces, Sara describes without evaluating. Her selfishness is what impels her to run her own life, it drives her autonomy, just as Moisheh's selfishness gives him the strength to study Torah. Ultimately, as with her father, the cost of that selfishness was solitude:

Knowledge was what I wanted more than anything else in the world. . . . So this is what it cost, daring to follow the urge in me. No father. No lover. No family. No friend. I must go on and on. And I must go on--alone (208).

Echoing Luke 14:26, Sara realizes that the price of her passion for learning is the quality of her human relationships. One is struck by the comparison between her parents' visits. Her mother comes to bring her a comforter and some food. Her father comes to place her under herem. Her mother quietly tries to support her daughters, and her father imposes his values on his entire family. Yet it is to her father that Sara compares herself, to him that she tries to justify her behavior, and ultimately, it is Moisheh who is the center of the family.

Sara's time in college is a time of transformation. She

becomes an educated American, her father grows old, and her mother becomes fatally ill. Sara returns to her mother's death bed, and at that terrible place, her father makes the ambivalence of his feelings toward Sara apparent for the first time. In bragging to the doctor, Moisheh states of Sara that "she has a head on her. Takes after her father, even though she's only a girl (249)." Evidently, Moisheh does recognize the replication of his own drive, intellect, and hardness in his daughter. Her struggle to live her own life (and, paradoxically, to embody similar autonomy as her father) make Sara not only unique but praiseworthy to Moisheh. He can never admit that to her, or even to himself. But a part of him has noticed. Again, he tells Sara "You understand a little more than your sisters, because you have a little bit of my head on you (259)."

This recognition of similarity heightens, rather than diffuses, their conflict. It is in the nature of ambivalence that seeing so much similarity in the antagonist is a source of greater struggle and anger, rather than a road to reconciliation. So, even while praising his daughter for being like him, Moisheh and Sara have a fight about performing kriyah in the presence of her mother's remains.

But something does change. Having accomplished what she wanted, Sara is now in a position to be more empathic, less threatened by her father. At her mother's death, she articulates this growth of character by saying "I felt literally Mother's soul enter my soul like a miracle (252)." Her mother had just told her to take good care of her father, and Sara now finds the

inner strength to do so. No longer locked in combat with a demonic natural force, she is able to recognize her father as a fallible, weak old man. Possessing superior strength, learning, and youth, Sara is able to be magnanimous. Thus, she is able to offer to pay a weekly allowance to her father and to her hated step-mother. She is able to look for an institution for her father to live in, and she is able to transcend her personal distaste for her step-mother and recognize that the new Mrs. Smolinsky meets some essential needs of her father.

Most importantly of all, the infusion of her Mother's soul into her own is an infusion of the ability to make a human bond. She is able to move beyond infatuation to real love. In Hugo Seelig she finds a caring American who shares her love of learning. In language reminiscent of her father's learning, she says of Seelig that "he had kept that living thing, that flame, that I used to worship as a child (270)."

Sara has resolved her ambivalence, thereby rebuilding her world view on a higher plane. Finally, she has been able to distinguish between form (Torah v. secular learning) and substance (knowledge itself). She is able to see herself both as a continuation of her father's values and as an American adaptation of those same values. Thus she is able to be comfortable with their differences and derive strength from their shared tenacity and love of learning. No longer a burden that will crush her, her father's heritage is a weight which adds solidity:

I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn't just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me.

Note

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All citations are taken from Yeziarska, Anzia, Bread Givers, (Persea Books: New York, 1975).