Yehoshua Bier: Second Place Academic  
Spring 2006  
The Dysons, My Father, and Me

When trying to think of my earliest recollection of my dad, the same image comes to mind over and again. He would be sitting in his study reviewing the Hebrew texts of either the five books of Moses, or a book on Halacha (Jewish laws and conduct). My dad is a Rabbi, and he has been studying the many aspects of Orthodox Jewry for most of his life (since he was 14 years old). I on the other hand do not fit the typical mold for the son of a Rabbi. I don’t study the bible too often, I pray only once-in-a-while, and I choose to hang out with friends who are mostly non religious. When I read Brower’s The Starship and the Canoe, I found it interesting how Freeman and George Dyson, father and son, lived such different lives. Freeman was a scientist who studied astrophysics, while his son dropped out of high school and lived in a tree house ninety five feet above the ground (Brower 1983). As different as they may have been though, they had some strikingly similar traits and characteristics. Both wanted to do some mass exploration, Freeman the skies, and George the waters. Both were brilliant in their own respect and determined to fulfill their passions in the best way they were capable. I find a similar situation when thinking about my father and I. We may look very different to the naked eye, but as far as personality and character goes, we are very similar. So I set a purpose of comparing my relationship with my dad to that of Freeman’s and George, and taking it a step further and comparing it to what is considered a normal father and son relationship.

Some of my research, in both psychology textbooks and a few Halacha based parenting books, has shown that the parents of a child are extremely important to developing a child’s feelings of self worth and competency, and Rabbi Noach Orlowek, an educator and counselor states that a parent’s biggest goal should be making their child feel competent and confident. In his book Children, John Santrock talks about the importance of parents’ roles in the development of their children. Santrock talks about how the best predictors of a child’s academic competence in the sixth grade is a parent’s effective communication with their child, a warm relationship between the two, positive expectations of achievement, and a rule based discipline rather than that of authority based (Santrock 2003). He talks briefly about a father’s role saying how a father’s involvement in with his child has a direct affect on the behavior and attitude that the child has towards schoolwork (Santrock 2003). A parent that is involves him/herself in acknowledging good behavior increases the child’s chance of continuing good behavior, and many studies have found that when teachers report regularly to parents about their students’ good work, student behavior and achievement are fortified not only in school but at home as well (Slavin 2000). Aside from the cognitive development of a child, a parent can effect the way the child grows up to respect (or not respect) the opinion and lifestyles of others (Orloweck 2002). Children learn by example, and it is important therefore to always be in the habit of treating everyone with respect, and Rabbi Orlowek seems to have the wording perfect, “if children are to respect us as parents, we must respect each other – and ourselves” (Orloweck 2002). All of this
information suggests that a parent’s involvement in their child’s life is directly connected with the way the child will turn out in principles, morals, and character.

The role of Freeman Dyson as he relates to his son George is a bit confusing to me. In some ways, I feel like he was very involved in George’s childhood, by assuring him that everything is ok after the frequent nightmares, worrying and checking on George when he camped out in the woods, and being involved in his early education. However in other aspects, it seems that Freeman was content to let George grow on his own and not interfering, an example of which was leaving his son in prison after he was arrested. George recalls the atmosphere at home as cold, feeling that his father saw him as his proxy rather than as his son (Brower 1983). It is not surprising therefore that George would deviate from his father’s life. He observed the way his father lived, his father’s relationships with different people and decided that he doesn’t want to be that way. Their relationship took a break, when George left home at the age of sixteen, and in those five years, father and son saw each other only once, and exchanged a few letters (Brower 1983). This might suggest that each was content in not being involved in the other’s life, a possible indication that they didn’t care for each other’s choices. It seems to me that the Dysons’ relationship with each other bears some resemblance to that of mine and my father.

My father was born to German parents, who dictated to him exactly how everything should be done. My father recalls many instances from his childhood where he would want to do some things different, but didn’t dare disobey his authoritarian-like parents. He left the house when he was fourteen to study at a Yeshiva (School of Jewish Studies), something that my grandparents weren’t too happy about. His way of rebelling against his parents was to become more religious, and his ultimate goal was to devote his life to studying the Torah (Old Testament and its commentaries) by becoming a full time Rabbi. He has since spent his life studying and teaching the Torah and is now employed as a Rabbi and Teacher in the Baltimore Jewish Community. My childhood seemed to be the opposite of my father’s, whereas I was brought up studying the Torah and practicing as an orthodox Jew. When I was thirteen I was sent to high school away from home, and my rebellion against my father began. I stopped my religious studies, all but ended my religious affiliation, and I began to be interested in becoming a “regular guy” unlike my “Rabbi of a dad.” My father and I did keep a close relationship all throughout my life, and I don’t recall any major disagreements (except about Judaism). I moved back home when I was 19 and I slowly began to resemble my dad’s behaviors more and more. I began to regularly study the Torah. I became more religious, while still keeping to my goal of being a “regular guy.” My father was always involved in his children, and I was no exception. He would walk me and my siblings to school on most days, telling us stories and jokes to make us feel better. He was always there whenever I had a question, and he always gave me an objective suggestion, even though he wished he could persuade me to become more like a Rabbi. I find that the similarities between me and my dad are in the way we conduct ourselves regularly, getting up early each morning, keeping our affairs in order, and having a strong work ethic. My father may not have inspired me to become a Rabbi, but he was definitely successful when it
came to encouraging good behavior and moral conduct. He has shown me that in order to be a happy individual, a person needs to follow their ambitions and dreams.

The Dysons seemed to have a distant relationship with each other, yet George learned a lot from his dad as far as ambition, goals and ethic. Although they each studied different topics, they both seemed to have the same overwhelming desire to rise to the top of their field and make a difference to the rest of the world. Similarly, my father is a motivated person, who goes after what he wants, and I’d like to think I’m the same way. Sure, my dad and I have our differences, whether it’s Saturday morning sermons, a non-Jewish girlfriend, or even just the clothing that I wear. But the underlying fact is that my dad and I have a healthy and loving relationship with each other, and George and Freeman Dyson had the same. Towards the end of the book they seemed to get along with each other better, and they began to show similarities in their thinking pattern (or so I noticed). I have always respected my father seeing him as a stable figure in my life, and Brower would suggest the same about George’s view of his father. As George grew older, he seemed to value his father’s opinion more and even started resembling his father in a few ways, a clear indication of the esteem to which he saw Freeman. The research on parent-child relationships suggests exactly this, that even though a person’s children may not resemble him/her on the surface, the things that matter most, like character and personality seem to have a positive transfer from parent to child when there is a healthy and involved relationship. And the father and son relationships that I have discussed, the Dysons and the Biers, appear to follow the trend.

Works Cited