

instructs his generals to “treat this young boy Absalom gently... for me.” When the battle rages, David seeks reports: “Is my boy Absalom safe?”

Young boy? Treat him gently? Is he safe? Absalom has driven David from the throne and is trying to kill him; he has drafted David’s top adviser, Ahitofel, to the rebel side, not to mention that he has already slept with David’s concubines. Why should David cut him any slack? Warlords don’t cut slack!

In the end, Absalom dies dramatically: His hair is caught in a tree branch, and he hangs there “between heaven and earth,” until he is stabbed and beaten to death by David’s troops. When the king hears this awful news, he is disconsolate, moaning along his heart-breaking speech: “My son, my son, Absalom. If only I died instead of you.... Absalom, Absalom, my son, my son!”

David’s generals, who have just risked their own lives to defend him, are astonished: “You are humiliating us!” they say. “You would have been happier if your own side lost, and we were all killed! You love your enemies and you hate your friends!”

King David’s reply is absent from the text. I imagine he said nothing. Perhaps he thought: “You are my friends, but you cannot be my children.” For the sake of the kingdom, he congratulated his soldiers, but I imagine his heart was not in it. At this moment, he did not care much for being David HaMelekh. He wanted his boy. ■

Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky is rabbi at Congregation Anshe Chesed in Manhattan, loves his two sons and two daughters, and prays they experience better fates than David’s children.

EXILE FROM GUYVILLE: A REFLECTION

by PAUL ZAKRZEWSKI

SOMETIME IN THE MIDDLE OF HIGH SCHOOL I WAS CONFRONTED WITH RATHER IRREFUTABLE EVIDENCE THAT I WASN’T MUCH OF A MAN.

Given this was the early 1980s—an era best remembered (and not without irony) for its androgynous male rock stars—you’d think that some gender latitude might have been in order. But latitude is typically not the case in the suburbs; especially not so in wealthy, overwhelmingly white ones like the southern Ontario town where I grew

up. I remember sitting in a large, empty, anonymous bucket of popcorn and extracted a handful. It was an impulsive move, even an aggressive one, or maybe it suggested to Syd a level of intimacy we hadn’t achieved. The normally mild-mannered Syd frowned and threw me a hard look.

“If you weren’t such a wimp, I’d punch you in the face right now,” he said.

I stared at him with what must’ve been a stupid expression, but it was less the threat and more the truth of what he’d said that stung. A wave of dismay gripped my bowels. Syd was right. I was a wimp.

It’s not like this had escaped my notice,

I felt singled out for special torment by the mean girls of seventh grade, the ones who wedged their tiny hips into Jordache jeans.

up. For reasons I’ve never understood, the wealthier and better educated the suburb, the less appetite there is for difference.

On this particular evening, my friend Syd (not his real name) and I had gone to the movies. Sitting in the theater, I had, without asking, reached into his enor-

ously large bucket of popcorn and extracted a handful. It was an impulsive move, even an aggressive one, or maybe it suggested to Syd a level of intimacy we hadn’t achieved. The normally mild-mannered Syd frowned and threw me a hard look. “If you weren’t such a wimp, I’d punch you in the face right now,” he said. I stared at him with what must’ve been a stupid expression, but it was less the threat and more the truth of what he’d said that stung. A wave of dismay gripped my bowels. Syd was right. I was a wimp. It’s not like this had escaped my notice,



iously counted the days to the dreaded “10 Minute Walk/Run,” a government-mandated health test administered each spring and fall during middle school. I felt singled out for special torment by the mean girls of seventh grade, the ones who wedged their tiny hips into Jordache jeans and whose Farrah Fawcett curls flipped across the their foreheads as they mocked my oily hair and bargain-basement velour tops. Deep down I wondered if I was unlovable, and my cherubic features—the ones that Syd, among others, loved to point out—seemed the nexus of my failure to be hard and lean.

As my mother saw it, being pudgy was compounded by the sin of over-sensitivity, and she did her best to cure me of both. Around the time of my bar mitzvah she put me on a variety of diets, each one of

Not surprisingly, my temperament and inclinations provoked a number of bullies along the way. From ages three to nine I lived in Mexico City, and it was there, in an abandoned lot across the street from my house, that an older boy once tried to push my face into a pile of dog shit. Trouble followed me to the British private school I attended, in the form of the only overtly anti-Semitic incidents of my life: name-calling (“Christ killer!”), shoving matches, and so on. And though Canada was very different in this respect, I still encountered bullying there too.

My father eventually learned about some, though not all, of these incidents. His face would turn very grave at moments like these,

I learned to enjoy my particular brand of masculinity, one that encouraged other men to lower their guard around me, and yet I still felt, as I sometimes still do, like an outsider in the world of men.

which focused my attention ever increasingly on the very body I longed to ignore. Even to this day, she likes to tell my wife that I was a fearful boy who never did like climbing trees. “I just felt like I had to push you a bit,” is my mother’s response whenever we talk about my teenage years.

Beginning around adolescence, I began to form a secret life that included a fascination with archeology and detective stories and vampires. At the end of the particularly awkward years of early adolescence, as I entered high school, I discovered a talent for analyzing movies and books. These interests put me in touch with a culture and history beyond the narrow confines of my hometown. At the same time, my friendships with one or two boys—unconventional, smart, sensitive, rebellious boys—filled me with a sense that I wasn’t entirely alone. By the end of high school I was itching to leave my home and hometown, certain the wider world had more understanding for the kind of man I was becoming.

as if he’d encountered a particularly knotty passage of philosophy. He’d explain the psychological makeup of bullies, their self-hatred and so on, as if by understanding the problem I might make it go away. Once, early on, he told me to punch back “if you have to.” Not surprisingly, I didn’t find his advice about bullies of much help.

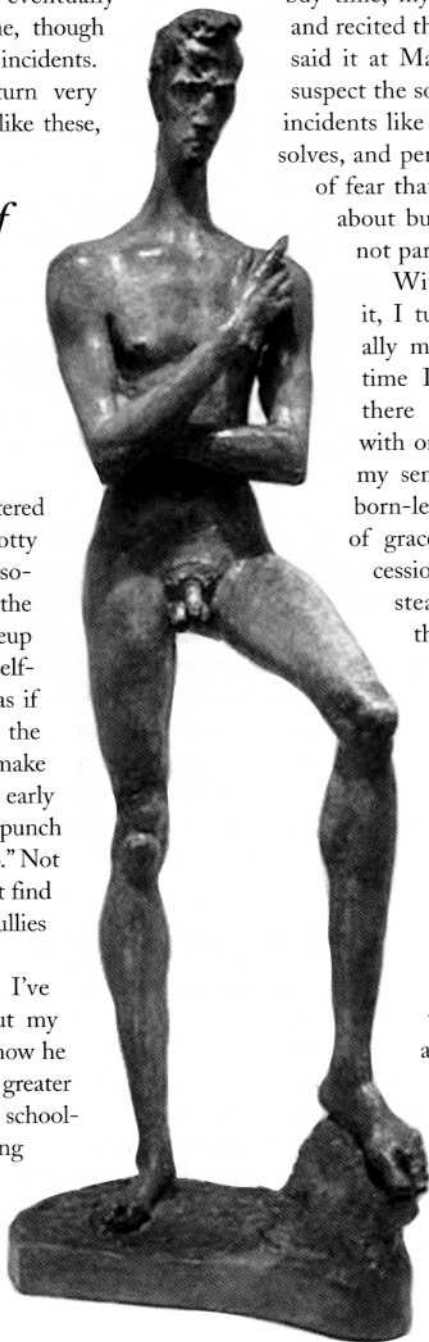
Now that I’ve learned more about my dad’s early life, I know he had navigated far greater dangers than the schoolyard bully. During World War II, my father had been saved by his nanny, a

righteous Catholic Pole named Genia, who gave him a false identity as her out-of-wedlock son. My father spent part of his time in a ghetto workshop, along with the other underage children of Jewish workers, and was occasionally forced to hide in the rafters, among bolts of cloths, whenever a Nazi inspection or *aktion* loomed.

In a number of instances my father was called upon to fake his Catholic identity—something he did with shrewdness that belied his age. The most memorable of these featured a pair of Polish blackmailers entering Genia’s apartment and demanding to inspect my father. As she pleaded and cajoled the men in order to buy time, my father got on his knee and recited the Lord’s Prayer as if he’d said it at Mass the Sunday before. I suspect the sort of fear you’d feel after incidents like these never entirely dissolves, and perhaps it was the memory of fear that kept my father’s advice about bullies vague, abstract and not particularly helpful.

Without entirely realizing it, I turned to more traditionally masculine mentors by the time I got to college. It was there I became close friends with one guy, six or seven years my senior, who had a natural-born-leader’s charisma and sense of grace; he slept with a succession of women, despite a steady girlfriend—something that struck me not only as dishonest but desperate, when I got to see the repercussions up close. Another older college buddy rode a Harley, snorted cocaine, and wasn’t above the occasional violent confrontation to settle scores; among our mutual friends, he was sometimes—and not always jokingly—called the “Marlboro Man.”

Sometimes I’d catch myself studying these guys, like a stranger in a new land, hoping to pick up the local customs



to better blend in. What I didn't expect was that the observation went both ways. "I find it easy to talk to you," Marlboro Man once said to me as we drove up to his father's cabin in upstate New York. With me he could talk about his interest in abstract painting or his mixed feelings about his absent, hard-charging father. At moments like these I learned to enjoy my particular brand of masculinity, one that encouraged other men to lower their guard around me and be themselves. It was a masculinity of a different sort, and yet I felt, as I still sometimes do, like an outsider in the world of men.

One thing I have learned, however, is that I'm far from being the only man who feels as I do.

Nearly two decades ago, Robert Bly's book *Iron John* brought to national consciousness a small network of retreats and self-help workshops. It was easy to skewer the Mythopoetic Men's Movement's hokier, New Age trappings: Images of well-fed weekend warrior types running semi-nude through forests played especially well in places like Time magazine. But when I encountered Bly's book I discovered that his arguments resonated with my own experience. Men need the approval and respect of other men—especially older men—whose presence at rites of initiation can help repair old wounds.

What Bly left out—and what rightly troubled some critics, including feminists like Betty Friedan—were the political implications of male consciousness-raising. Bly didn't see that the explorations he encouraged were intimately connected to changes brought on by the feminist movement, and was a reaction to women's liberation in all its senses.

Twenty years down the line, men of my generation are wrestling with even greater shifts in gender roles than ever before. Even as the tradition of male as sole breadwinner dwindles into memory, American men have assumed a greater variety of roles than perhaps at any other time. Today we are metrosexuals, smoothies, mannies (i.e. male nannies), SAHD (stay-at-home dads), and more. Some of these words signal simply the resurgence of age-old tropes—what is the metrosexual if not today's dandy?—while others,

like SAHDs or the "gay vague" style of men's fashion, suggest a wholesale reinvention of traditional gender roles.

I don't know when and if men will come together to really talk through the enormous changes in masculine roles cur-

What are the political implications of male consciousness-raising?

rently underway. Most striking to me, as a relatively new father, is gender "convergence," as new parents seek to more equitably split childcare and household chores. In the 1970s, sociologists found the average fathers spent a third as much time with children as mothers did; by 2000, the number had shot up to three-quarters. The men I know are still very much making it up as they go along, and this creates a whole new set of tensions that we're just beginning to explore. We're in the middle of a quiet revolution for men. ■

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Moving Traditions, MovingTraditions.org

Men of Reform Judaism, nftb.org

Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs (of the Conservative Movement), fjmc.org

Keshet, working for the inclusion of GLBT Jews in Jewish life, hosts

Massachusetts Men's Group: A discussion, social, and support group for gay, bi, trans, questioning, and queer Jewish men. michail@keshetonline.org

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