

# Silence and Wondering

SAÏD SAYRAFIEZADEH

## Avram's Father's Idols

A YEARLONG CONVERSATION

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Each month over the course of this year, a guest columnist reflects on the *midrash* of Avram destroying the idols in his father's shop. We've asked our writers to think about the idols they must still transcend to "get to Canaan."

**His presence remains, though. Even now when I read the newspaper, I will find myself wondering as a matter of reflex what would be his opinion...And then, I do what I can to think independently, which, I suppose, is one of the lessons of that timeless tale of the boy who swung the axe.**

It has been almost five years since my father last spoke to me. He is no doubt hurt and disappointed by what I've written about my childhood spent in a small Trotskyist organization known as "the party." "It is an attack on the working class," he would probably say. He is still a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party, after all, living in Brooklyn — just a subway ride away from me — and participating in that never-ending procession of meetings, conferences, and sales of the *Militant* newspaper, whose masthead reads: "A socialist newsweekly published in the interests of working people."


Notwithstanding my father's charm and wit and generosity in picking up the check at dinner, his disappearance from my life has not been such a great loss. I'm happily married and residing in Manhattan in a beautiful apartment that I own, despite having been taught as a child to loathe private property. No, the real loss occurred when my father abandoned my mother and me when I was nine months old. "Mahmoud went off to fight for a world socialist revolution," she would often say by way of explanation. And because this world socialist revolution was imminent, indeed was about to

occur at any moment, my mother sacrificed almost everything for the party — of which she also was a member — including lots of her time, some of her money, and all of her passion. Most importantly, she maintained a chronic and debilitating worship of my father, which prevented her from ever being able to move on and find someone else. I was doomed, therefore, to a life of fatherlessness. I was also doomed to a home in which my father's absence was as great as his presence.

One summer afternoon when I was four years old, my mother took me to a performance of "Jack and the Beanstalk." I was so affected by what I saw that for many weeks afterward I

would greet my mother upon her return home from her unhappy job as a secretary and demand that we go at once to my bedroom so we could reenact the story. Reclining with exhaustion on my bed, my mother would gamely take on every role in the drama, including the cow, the harp, the giant, and, of course, the widow, which is to say, herself. I was only Jack, pulsating with a spectrum of emotions, each one of them in the extreme, as I scampered around the bedroom enduring poverty, banishment, terror, and that final glorious moment when I would descend the beanstalk just steps ahead of the giant and scream for my mother to hand me the axe, which she did without a second to lose, managing to be both giant and mother at once, crying out "Fee, fi, fo, fum!" and "Hurry, Jack! Hurry!" And in my mind, I would swing that imaginary axe and down would come the beanstalk with the giant landing dead in the grass and the harp and goose in my mother's arms, meaning that my mother and I would now live happily ever after. That is, until the next day, when I would accost her once more at the front door of our apartment and lead her by the hand into my bedroom.

While the story of "Jack and the Beanstalk" was obviously a version of the socialist revolution that we dreamed about — eliminating the wealthy oppressor — it was more an indication of my own private desire to triumph over my father and rid him from our home once and for all. Alas, that never quite happened. But when I was sixteen, my mother resigned from the Socialist Workers Party and began to shape a new life for herself. And in my adult years, I would occasionally meet my father for dinner as we tried to get to know one another. But then I started to write and publish pieces about my childhood, and my father stopped speaking to me altogether.

His presence remains, though. Even now, when I read the newspaper, I will find myself wondering as a matter of reflex what his opinion would be. This is how I am able to keep my father close at hand, as my mother did when I was young. And then, with great difficulty, I do what I can to think independently, which, I suppose, is one of the lessons of that timeless tale of the boy who swung the axe. 

Saïd Sayrafiezadeh is the author of *When Skateboards Will Be Free: A Memoir* (The Dial Press, 2009).