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June 17, 2012: My First Fatherless Father's Day

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Title: My First Fatherless Father's Day

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6/17/2012—Happy Father's Day to all, especially Jonas, Ryan and Tom.

My father passed away last Thanksgiving, at 94. I miss him but I cannot say I am sorry he died. His last years were not good for him or for his family. Father's Day is a time to think of him and of the diminishment of fathers in America in general.

The traditional role of fathers was to provide materially and spiritually (in the sense of discipline and morality) for their families. My father succeeded very well in providing materially and that was very important to him. He was a successful businessman and investor. He made money while everyone else lost money. I owe him a great deal, including the freedom after law school to pursue my life free from student debt.

Spiritually, I think he was not as successful. He certainly tried to instill the values of Jewish life in his sons, but I'm not sure those values were truly embedded in him. Once he moved to Florida, many years ago, Judaism sort of faded away because he never connected institutionally with it there. He never joined a synagogue in Florida, for example.

I can look at fatherhood in general through the lens of my own father. More and more, the American economy does not allow men to support their families. I know there are other possible models of family life, and I am not denigrating them, but they are no improvement. It is obviously better for men to be able to earn good wages and for fathers and mothers then to be free to decide the best model of child rearing for that family.

Fatherhood is also diminished from divorce. The tendency is for the father to fade away from family life or to be drawn away by a second marriage. This happened to my father to a certain extent. (Of course you can be very lucky in a second marriage, as I was, and end up with a happier, bigger, though more complicated family.) Again, divorce is often necessary and a vast improvement, but it would be better to choose more appropriate partners in the first place and for a lifetime.

But the main diminishment of fathers is not economic or social. It is deeper. The crucial point of fatherhood is to be a rock of integrity in the stormy sea of life. Your children are supposed to look at you and say, I know what honesty and forthrightness look like because my father was like that. I hope children receive love from their fathers as well, but if I had to choose, I would choose uprightness.

But American life has lost its sense of integrity. All around is lies. I have a hard time thinking of anyone in public life I really trust. I certainly don't see leaders of industry putting their workers and customers ahead of their own financial interests. I don't see politicians telling the truth—unpleasant truth—to voters. I don't see pundits breaking ranks with their political factions. I trust most scientists, but Climategate undermined even that.

So Happy Father's Day. And if you want to know how to be a good father, I'll tell you. Work hard. Put your family first. Listen when your children want to talk. Always tell the truth. It's the most difficult and important job a man can have.