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Fatherhood's Cold War

By Daniel Brenner

A week ago, as I was in Miami visiting my grandmother, I ran into some trouble. I was coming back from taking my sons to Monkey Jungle, and driving along the Florida turnpike. The radio warned me to what would be up ahead-traffic blockades-angry Cuban-American truckers driving 40 miles an hour on a stretch of road where 70 is standard for the slow lane. This was going to be hellish.

As a Jew and as a father, this story fascinates me. A six-year-old boy loses his mother at sea in a desperate plight for a better life. He is greeted by thousands of strangers and distant relatives, all Americans, who shower him with love and Disney World. They want him to stay. But his father, his estranged father, sits back in Cuba waiting for his beloved son to return.

Elian's story echoes the stories I have heard of my own family. In particular, I reflect on my grandfather's arrival in America-- a nine-year-old boy fleeing

persecution in Poland. I also can't help but think of the Jewish children who lost their parents to sickness on the steerage deck of some dingy vessel and came as orphans to the new world.

So my heart goes out to this boy, and I sympathize with his mother's dream of a new life.

But as a father I'm worried about another side of this tragic story.

Imagine that it was his father who took him on that boat, and it was his mother who was left back in Cuba. There would be absolutely no question in anyone's mind that the boy should be returned. It would have been a front-page story one day and a memory the next. But it is the fact that it was Juan Miguel Gonzalez, the father, who stayed behind, and the fact that he had been divorced from his wife, that connects this case to the larger issue of fatherhood and the mixed up world of gender politics.

Fatherhood, in an era in which the divorce rate continues to hover around 50 percent and in which both men and women are working longer hours, has been increasingly devalued. I recently watched a news documentary on the thriving bounty hunter industry - a line of work generally occupied with the thankless job of collecting alimony from delinquent fathers. Yet while I have sympathy for the woman and children who suffer from their actions, I fear that the demonization of fathers only makes the matter worse. To make matters worse, it seems that the only defenders of fatherhood that receive media attention have been the fundamentalist Christian "Promise Keepers" whose football stadium rallies two years ago drew heavy critique from all sides and ended in heavy debt.

This past week, it has been ironic that the defender of fatherhood is a woman, namely Janet Reno. Another woman, Doris Meissner, a commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, interviewed Elian's father and determined that he does love his son, and wants him back.

I agree with these women in their insistence that Elian be returned to his father. Not because of the legal battle over jurisdiction, but because of the simple fact that fatherhood is in danger of crumbling. Castro's Cuba will soon be a history lesson, but fatherhood, God-willing, will continue, and it needs some rejuvenating. I can only imagine the impact that will be felt by fathers everywhere as they watch as Juan Miguel Gonzalez sees his son again.

So I sat in traffic-not as bad as the radio had predicted-and I reflected on fatherhood. My two boys in the back seat, goofing around with their Monkey

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Jungle souvenirs, blissfully unaware of the world they are to inherit.



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