Neuman Family Therapy
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Chapter 4:

The fourth session: A new son, a new wife – Who can argue with that?

A new wife:

The session starts with a sense of supposed playfulness by Orna and Itay. They knock on Rueben’s clinic door, holding suitcases. Orna says: “We didn’t have anywhere else to go, so we came here”, and then they both burst out laughing. Metaphorically speaking, however, they are right – they do not have anywhere to leave their emotional baggage, except with Rueben, the therapist. In my opinion, the whole session revolves around this axis: around whether it is possible to acknowledge the burden that each of them is carrying and the difficulty in the process of change, or whether it is better to focus on the change that has already taken place, to declare victory and to interpret this change as the end to the problem. Of course, the drawback of declaring victory based on partial information, is that “reports from the battlefield” will keep coming, and what seems to be a victory in today’s battle will not necessarily indicate a victory in the war or even in tomorrow’s battle. Yet, how can the changes that have taken place – such as Orna’s, Itay’s and the whole family’s newly developed freedom – be supported without detracting from the complexity and multi-faceted nature inherent in every change? How can these changes be respected, while still honoring the ambivalence and fragility of any change at this early stage?

As the session begins, it becomes apparent that Orna is on her way to a vacation abroad for 8 days, something which was made possible by the fact that she now has a “new son”, one that even Michael cannot criticize: Itay slept at his father’s house, woke up on time for school, did his homework, did not eat all the time, dressed better – seemingly everything, really everything, is fine. Rueben tries to decipher the source of this change but receives a clear warning from Orna not to ruin it. She asks: “Do you not think you are a good enough psychologist to have caused such a change?”. Later in the session, Orna details the conversation they all had as a family, following Rueben’s advice, regarding the miscarriage she suffered (in the first season of “In Treatment”), the meal they enjoyed during it and the time it meant they spent together. It
seems as though everything has settled down, but Rueben remains unsettled, and continues to press Orna and to ask for explanations, while at the same time attends to issues that may encourage her to develop her Theory of Mind and to consider what may have brought about the changes she describes. In my opinion, Rueben does the right thing here: he is justly skeptical and concerned by their “flight into health” (or in our culture – the sense that an immediate and sudden transformation is possible, and may be a possible solution to all our problems).

Orna’s impulsiveness works against her and against her ability to understand her child. In her mind, if Michael has a new relationship then that is final; if Itay has shown significant improvement then he is a new child who understands that having divorced parents is not the end of the world; and if she understands that she cannot rehabilitate her relationship with Michael then the matter is closed for good. Why is it surprising, therefore, that she decides to go abroad for 8 days? She believes that everyone has reached "contentment." Yet, it is hard not to notice that Orna was pushed into the mode of activity or "Doing" on the basis of emotional factors, rather than being able to acknowledge her feelings. She finds it hard to delay her reactions and even harder to contain her feelings. It seems that she does not have the freedom to bear the presence of contradictory emotions inside herself, nor to acknowledge the ambivalence that forms part of her internal world – a part worth acknowledging. Thus the evolution of events takes place because she cannot contain herself or her feelings as a result of what takes place around her. At present, she is unable to recognize her jealousy of Michael and his new girlfriend, Tali, nor to talk of it. She is unable to touch upon her disappointment of the fact that Itay is becoming closer to his father and parting from her nor to share these feelings with Rueben. Surprisingly, she finds a last minute trip with a friend abroad. In this way she does not need to stay with herself or with her difficult emotions. And who knows, perhaps deep down the thought that if everything sorts itself out with Itay, perhaps he and his father will recognize her importance and worth. There is a clear flight here – a flight into health and a flight to another reality, a flight abroad.

Last week I concluded my article with words that still seem relevant: “It is easier for her (and her husband) to act rather than to understand. In the present therapeutic work, it is possible to help Orna look inwards, to open herself up, and to start understanding that there is significance and reward in activity that requires "Being" and not simply doing. Although such
an “activity” is demanding, nonetheless less doing can bring with it a new way of experiencing and "being in the world.”

I will not expand on this here, but there is room to ask what are Orna’s fantasies regarding her trip? What does she expect/hope to find abroad? I believe that in such a question lies the answer to the more fundamental issue: How can we help Orna attend to her feelings? I think, that opening with questions regarding the here and now (like investigating her fantasies regarding the present trip abroad) and questions regarding her life in the past, will be the way to help her in treatment.

A new son?

Before she left, Orna asked Itay if he wanted her to stay in Israel, and not to go abroad. When Itay later refers to the possible cancellation of her trip, Orna panics sufficiently in order for Itay to understand her message and to immediately withdraw the possibility of objection, saying he was only joking. It is sometimes useful to communicate very serious issues with irony or humor, as in this way it is possible to back off from them at the same time that one is communicating. In this way, Orna leaves for her vacation, free from any concern (and she does not ask herself how can she leave in this way, free from any and all concern?). However, when Rueben tries to understand what Itay is going through surrounding several important issues of him being a “new boy”, it is clear that the boy understands that he is being invited to say what is on his mind, with or without the overlay of a jesting tone. Yet, even in this important encounter with Itay, alongside his genuine wish to hear what it is Itay wants to tell, Ruben becomes very active (indeed too active) in his attempt to relate to the feelings and events in Itay’s life. This leads to an infringement and impingement on the patient’s psychological defenses and an intrusion upon his freedom and privacy. While respecting the patient’s defenses and freedom to choose to share or not to share is a central principle in psychodynamic therapy (and does not necessarily guide other therapeutic approaches), this principle is very much dictated by the unique person of the therapist, rather than the theoretical approach that guides his/her work. It seems to me that the treatment of this family, and its several generations, would benefit if Rueben would focus more on the interaction between the things that the protagonists of the treatment are interested in but at the same time afraid of. Focusing on the ways in which Michael, Orna and Itay advance towards certain issues while at the same time seeking to defend themselves from
dealing with those issues could be illuminating for each of them individually and for all of them together.

In an attempt to reach a significant dialogue with Itay, Rueben raises almost everything he heard from Orna regarding the changes that have taken place in Itay's eating, sleeping and lifestyle habits. In order to encourage him to speak about the issue of food, Rueben shares of his own difficulty in sticking to a diet, and Itay explains how easy it is – without explaining what is involved in it being “easy”. *The conversation about his parents’ attempt to bring another child to the world* is particularly interesting, even if intrusive, simply in it being based upon the mother’s report. Rueben’s attempt to link the miscarriage to Itay’s fear of also being “miscarried”, raises a smile and elicits a sharp response by Itay: “it is probably too late” to miscarry him – and here Rueben also smiles, with Itay and with us.

With the end of the session, it becomes apparent that Michael is not coming, and the therapeutic situation, and the “new boy” change. Itay becomes anxious, trying to call both his parents who are unavailable, and becomes very tense. A moment earlier he was a child that did not eat (at all?), and now he expresses his hunger and starts eating non-stop. Rueben gives him food, a home, holding, and, in this way, something about the relationship between Rueben and Itay seems fitting and close. Itay raises the thought that he will stay in Rueben’s son’s room. In this way, at the end of the chapter, we pass through Itay’s fear that he may be miscarried, to the meaning of the disintegration of his family, to his very real experience of being dropped and abandoned.

**A new man:**

Michael, who did not arrive to pick up Itay at the end of the chapter, managed to pass on the message, through Orna, that he “has had enough” (most likely of the treatment). Is that so?

Chapter 5:

“*And He shall turn the heart of the fathers to their children and (– since the fathers are also children –) the heart of the children to their fathers*” *Malachi 4:6*
In this session only the men of the family arrive, after Orna has extended her vacation for another week. Rueben meets them bearded and tiered, but attentive. Itay refers to the changes in Rueben’s appearance, mentioning his stubble, and his father joins in. We hear that Rueben cancelled last week’s session, but the reason for this cancellation only becomes apparent at the end of the episode.

Itay and Michael sit on the sofa in close proximity, and Rueben hears of the time they spent together. Itay describes his stay with his father as “cool”, saying that they did lots of things. Michael, however, speaks in a mocking tone, telling of the days in which Itay did not go to school or how his weight made horse riding a problem, making his frustration and criticism clear. After Itay stresses that he does not have a weight problem and that it is perhaps the horse that has the problem, he gets up to go to the waiting room to get a drink. Michael forbids him to leave the room, saying he can drink water in the treatment room. Itay stops, and while still standing, insists that he wants to leave. This is a tense and fraught moment: Itay is not cooperating with his father, and it is not clear which of the two will concede. Following a silence, without intervention by the therapist (thank God), Itay does as he wishes, leaving his father to look like someone who has failed the parenting test of demonstrating control and authority over one’s child. If at the start of the session Itay had listened to his father and removed the chewing gum from his mouth (and put it in his father’s open palm – an action to which obedience has many possible meanings, including sharing that is not truly sharing), then only moments later, his son is not willing to participate even on this level, leaving to the waiting room. As a result, Michael receives an individual therapy and parental guidance session that is of great significance. Itay’s guidance towards such an opportunity was appropriate, and like with many of our patients, the supervision he provides needs to be listened to. Those who want to delve deeper into the “supervision” provided by patients to their therapists are advised to read Patrick Casement’s volume “On learning from the patient”.

There is an abundance of topics that are raised in the conversation between Michael and Rueben, and all are interwoven: some come from the perspective of the relationship between Itay and his father at present, others from that of Michael’s relationship with himself, and others still from the perspective of Michael’s relationship with his own father. The relationship between Michael and Rueben is also touched upon, but not developed in the present dialogue.
In today’s session we learn that Michael is concerned by the fact that during Itay’s stay, Itay lay listless, eating endlessly, leaving Michael to feel that he did not succeed in providing good enough fathering, or in other words: to feel like a failure. In time we learn that Orna did not come back from vacation, that Tali, his girlfriend, left him, and that he felt that he really needed last week’s therapy session, but it was exactly then that Rueben had cancelled. In the present session, there are two principal therapeutic directions in Rueben works with Michael. The first – directs towards ‘Reframing’ the past, or changing Michael’s perceptions, such that what was previously defined by Michael as a failure is redefined as a success. For example, when Itay refused to have a shower and began to smell, Michael was angered, but since he was afraid to lose control and to beat Itay, he restrained himself and did not say a word, feeling totally paralyzed. Similarly, when Tali presented him with an ultimatum demanding that Itay showered or that she would leave, Michael reacted angrily, saying: “If so, it is best you leave”. Rueben acts to redefine these moments as achievements, based on the fact that Michael did not beat Itay, thus managing to control his anger, and stood by his son in front of Tali, instead of forcing him to change. In this way, according to Rueben, Michael the father accepted his son, Itay, just as he is. Furthermore, Rueben reminded Michael that Itay had recalled the time they spent together as “cool”, that too being proof for his success as a father.

The topic of reframing raises significant questions, both from a theoretical and a practical perspective. Such intervention is welcome as it widens the possibility for observation, yet when it cancels significant perceptions, thoughts and beliefs that Michael holds about himself, it is less welcome. There needs to be room to listen to Michael’s self-criticism, which is based on an internal reality of anger and disappointment, and in this way, to pay attention to the complexity and richness of the internal and inter-subjective world by which the patient lives. Instead of replacing or exchanging a wholly negative perspective with one that accentuates only the positive, it must be possible to put together a perspective that can contain the diverse feelings, experiences and memories and their complexity. It is possible to arrange these in a meta-framework that recognizes that there can be conflict and contradictory feelings and motives in parental attitudes and experiences. Such intervention would serve the therapeutic purpose of broadening Michael’s understanding of the way he and those around him live and behave (even in this short term intervention). Such a therapeutic focus can contribute to the formation of understanding and insight that can be influential on many levels.
The other therapeutic direction to Rueben’s intervention deals with issues of *father-son relations*, relying upon the content raised by Michael about himself and his father. It seems that there are similarities in the way in which Michael describes his father and the way in which he lives and relates to Itay. The conversation with Rueben opens the possibility of touching upon the source of his fathering style, and the significance of his own experience as a son. Looking into the past and the numerous identifications between the three generations of men is opened through reference to the similarities and differences between Michael’s and Itay’s experiences. Rueben asks Michael what he thought of his father and how he felt towards him when he himself was 11 years old (Itay’s current age), and through this manages to link the three generations for a moment. This link is not only achieved through interpretation, but mostly through a psychological association with feelings of love and admiration towards fathers, and to the strength of the connection between father and son. Although this association is quickly abandoned, as a result of Rueben’s insistence on re-framing, the topic of father-son relations was significantly raised, stirring deep layers in Michael’s soul, and seemingly also those of Rueben.

The session ends when Michael gets up to go and stands to part from Rueben at the door. At that moment Michael stops and asks Rueben if he is in mourning [easily recognizable to a Israeli audience by the custom of refraining from shaving following a significant family bereavement for a period of a week or a month] . Rueben answers that he sat Shivah in mourning for his father the previous week. Michael expresses his condolences and lays his hand on Rueben’s shoulder. This gesture conveys a message of closeness and caring – and adds to the overall emotional tone of the entire session, as it relates to the themes of men, sons, fathers, and the close relations between them.

It is too early to talk of the practical success of this session in bringing father and son together, or in the words of the prophet—“turn[ing] the heart of the fathers to their children, and the heart of the children to their fathers”. Nonetheless, we clearly see an opening and connection to the hearts of the fathers and to those parts of the fathers’ hearts (and of their memories and feelings) that stem from their being the sons of their own fathers. Those same experiences and parts of their inner being form and influence the type of fathers they become and the type of fathering they will provide their sons. When the different parts of men’s hearts are brought together-- those parts constructed from their being sons and those parts constructed from their
experiences as fathers, -- a window of opportunity opens. That opportunity can allow meaningful growth in who these men are and the types of fathers that they can still become. These changes influence their sons’ and daughters’ experiences of their fathers, and impact meaningfully on who they themselves will become in the future.