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## Re-Engineering the Family

By SETH LIEBERMAN

I cheerfully returned to New York to visit my parents and celebrate Father's Day with my Dad. I knew something was amiss when, as he opened the door and I stepped in, he said, "Before you unpack your suitcase, I need to ask for your input."

"Sure Dad," I said. "What's up?"

"I don't want the fact that you're a stakeholder to distort anything you might say. Promise me you'll think objectively."

"OK," I said. "Shoot."

"Well, sometimes people get defensive, and they want to know why. . ."

"Enough already, Dad. What's going on?"

"Re-engineering the family," he said, with a stern look on his face.

"I can tell this is going to be one of those long conversations. I'm going to get a beer from the fridge," I said with a sigh.

"Wait right here. Before you start using up scarce liquid resources, I want to know what you think are our essential familial processes."

"What the heck are you talking about, Dad?"

"You know, what is it that we as a family do? In this time of scarcity and the global village, we can't merely repeat what we've always done. We have to eliminate waste and redundancy. Rather than tinkering with an obviously outmoded form, it's better to start from scratch, and determine what it is that we do."

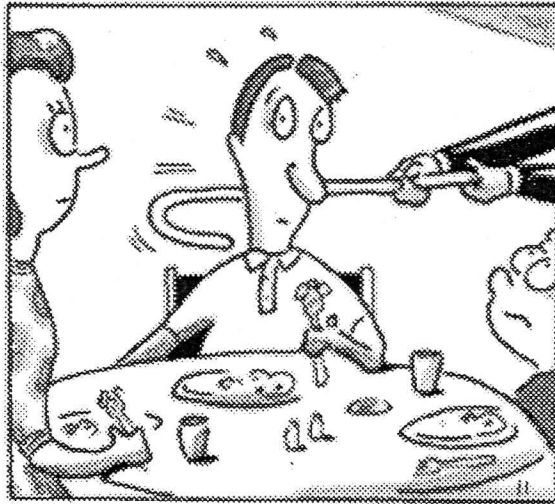
"Well, we go out to the movies sometimes," I volunteered.

"True," he said, "but one person can do that alone."

"We have bagels and lox together on Sunday mornings."

"Yes, but one person can also do that. You haven't even lived in the same building with us for over 12 years."

"Enough about that, Dad. We've al-



M. E. COHEN

ready talked about my growing up and leaving home. But there is something we do while we're eating bagels and lox that you can't do alone. We have conversations." I smiled, because I knew I finally had him.

Without even pausing, he said: "But that's making an assumption based on previous limitations of technology. I can eat my bagel and lox, and phone any one of a billion people while sitting here enjoying the spaciousness of my dining room table."

"OK, you're right on that one." I searched my memory for a way to stump him. "How's this? In the family we also love each other. You'll admit that, won't you? Remember how joyful you were during Pam's wedding? You gushed about how it

felt for your only daughter to get married."

"Who wouldn't be joyful?" he countered. "I had managed to divest myself of an uncompetitive product in a declining industry."

"Shush, I can't believe you're saying that. If Mom overhears you, she'll scream. Hey, where is Mom, anyway?"

"Redundancy results in a failure to compete. It was for the good of the family."

"Dad, what the heck has gotten into you?"

"Multiskill roles. On the way back from work, I pick up the groceries. When I get home, I toss up a tuna salad, eat it, wash the dishes, kiss myself on the hand, and go to sleep. Studies show that doing multiple tasks is the best antidote for boredom."

"That's brutal."

"Doing more with less, I call it. The family's shaping up, if you ask me, though there still are a few kinks of redundancy left to hammer out."

"You don't mean. . . ?"

"Yes," he said, and handed me a pen and a piece of paper filled with legal jargon. It was a termination agreement for me to sign. As I hesitated, he said, "If you sign now, you'll get a bag of free bagels and six months at the outplacement firm."

"An outplacement firm for a son. Who'll take me at my age?" I gasped.

"I can't take care of you forever," he said, and motioned toward the door.

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## Notable & Quotable

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To take a more in-depth look at issues affecting Asian/Pacific Americans and all others people, a panel discussion on immigration, affirmative action and welfare re-