

Linking the Generations: Thoughts on Parashat Matot

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By

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Angel for Shabbat

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Rabbi Akiba believed that parents transmit to their children six characteristics: physical appearance, strength, wealth, wisdom, longevity, and “mispar ha-dorot lefanav”—the number of generations before (Mishnah Eduyot 2:9). What is meant by this last phrase?

Children are not born into a historical vacuum. They are heirs to the earlier generations of their families. In the case of Jewish children, they are not only heirs to their particular family traditions, but they “inherit” all the previous generations of the Jewish people going back to the time of Abraham.

The challenge to parents, grandparents and elders is to transmit to the new generations the secret of feeling united with the past generations, of feeling a kinship with historical personalities as though they are contemporary companions. We introduce our children and grandchildren to the number of generations before them, so that they come to realize that they are in a life-long dialogue among all the generations of their family and of their people. This is a wonderful gift: it provides historical memory, rootedness, an expansive vision of Jewish peoplehood, and strength to deal with life today and in the future.

The older generations communicate not merely with words, but by the living experience of Jewish observances and ideals. In sharing our deepest thoughts and emotions, in bringing our younger generations into lives of Torah and mitzvot, we transmit the adventure of Jewish civilization and destiny.

Some time ago, a group of Jewish teenagers visited our synagogue for Friday night services. Obviously, they had not received a very intensive religious education. They sat through the services with blank expressions on their faces; most of them did not even bother to open prayer books. They felt no

connection—not even curiosity—about the religious traditions of our people. They were strangers to the generations who came before.

Too often, parents and grandparents see their responsibility as providing material well-being to the younger generations of their family. Indeed, this is a valid responsibility. But it is also vital to tend to the spiritual, moral and emotional well-being of our children and grandchildren. If we don't give our children "the number of generations before," we have robbed them of their birthrights, and we have fostered their sense of spiritual deracination.

Some years ago, there was a well-publicized child custody battle, in which the mother sued the father for childcare in "a moderately luxurious mode." She asked for \$4400 a day! She explained that she needed this sum in order to provide her child with antique furniture, maids, horse-riding lessons, meals at restaurants, an apartment with a prestigious address, a suitable summer home etc. The mother was indeed awarded a huge sum for child support, and yet it is quite possible that the child is still deprived in the most important areas of life. Money cannot buy a feeling of belonging, a feeling of connectedness to deep and nourishing traditions. Money cannot buy a warm and loving relationship with "the number of generations before." Money cannot buy proper moral values or ethical proclivities. The mother worried about her child's horse-riding lessons and fancy living conditions: she would have done a greater service to her child by worrying more about the child's soul.

In this week's Torah portion, we read that the tribes of Reuben and Gad asked Moses if they could remain on the other side of the Jordan River, and not enter the Promised Land along with the rest of the Israelites. They said: we have a great multitude of cattle. "We will build sheepfolds here for our cattle and cities for our children."

Moses was troubled by the fact that they first expressed concern for their cattle—their material wealth—and only then mentioned the needs of their children. Moses pointedly instructed them: "Build cities for your children and folds for your sheep." Your priority needs to be with your children's wellbeing, not with your sheep and cattle. You need to put your primary energies into raising proper children.

We can most effectively transmit "the number of generations before" not by sending our children to synagogue—but by taking them to synagogue with us. We can most successfully communicate the values of Torah not by sending our children to study Torah—but by studying Torah with them ourselves. If we want

them to be connected to our people and our traditions, we ourselves need to be connected to our people and traditions.

“The number of generations before” does not only refer to those ancestors of the past: it also refers to us.

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