The Mystery of the Generations: Thoughts on Parashat Pinehas

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Pinehas

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Among Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's lectures, was one that dealt with the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. "A grandfather stands before his newly born grandchild filled with paradoxical thoughts. Feelings of renewal merge with fading memories of the past."

A grandparent gazes at grandchildren with a sense of wonder. Fifty, sixty and more years separate them. The grandparent is part of the "old generation," while the grandchildren are part of a new world with new challenges and opportunities. Yes, the grandparent feels a sense of family continuity—but also a sense of anxiety. Will we—of different generations—feel a sense of harmony, a common history and destiny? Will we be able to talk to each other heart to heart? Or will alienation set in? Will the grandchildren have different life agendas than we have?

The larger question is: how can we hold our community and culture together from generation to generation? How do we avoid the ubiquitous problem of "the generation gap"?
The Mishnah (Eduyot 2:9) cites the opinion of Rabbi Akiba, who stated that parents transmit 6 characteristics to their children: physical appearance, strength, wealth, wisdom, longevity. The sixth quality is "mispar ha-dorot lefanav", the number of generations before them. But what exactly does this mean?

Children are not born into a historical vacuum. They are heirs to the generations of their family going back through the centuries and millennia. In the case of Jewish children (and grandchildren), they are not only heirs to their particular family's traditions, but "inherit" all the previous generations of the Jewish people going back to the time of Abraham and Sarah.

The challenge to the older generations is to transmit to the new generations a feeling of connectedness with the past. We introduce our children and grandchildren to “the number of generations before them”, so that they come to see the biblical characters of thousands of years ago as part of their own group of close friends. We teach them that “we” were slaves in Egypt; that “we” were redeemed; that “we” built the Temples in Jerusalem; that “we” went into exile. Rashi and Rambam “are” our teachers. Our earlier generations continue to live in our memories, and are a presence in our lives. We want our children and grandchildren to understand that they are engaged in a life-long dialogue among all the generations of their family and of their people. What a wonderful gift to give children! And what a tragedy when this gift is not conveyed!

In a traditional religious setting, there need not be a generation gap, where alienation sets in between the generations. In some unique, mysterious way, the different generations see themselves as contemporaries. We share a spiritual outlook, a set of ideals, a style of living according to the mitzvoth. We have the gift of “the number of generations before us”.

This week’s Torah portion includes a listing of the offerings that were to be made on the Sabbaths and holy days. These sacred days are powerful opportunities to bring the generations together in common and heartfelt dialogue. They provide ongoing spiritual context for shared experiences and shared memories between the generations. The observance of Shabbat and holy days serves to unite the generations by forging a profound awareness that we are all part of one family and one people. From the beginnings of the Jewish tradition to the end of time—members of all of our generations are contemporaries.

This is the profundity and the mystery of the generations. This is the profundity and the mystery of the Jewish people’s ongoing adventure.

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