Souls and Goals: Thoughts from Rabbi David de Sola Pool a"h

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By
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Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool served Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City for a period spanning 63 years, from 1907 until his death in December 1970. In remembrance of the 50th year anniversary of his passing, I quote from an article he wrote in 1944, entitled: "Are We Disinheriting Our Own Children?"

"What parent would willingly disinherit a child, the child that looks to the parent with hero-worshipping trust? Yet tragically many are the parents in Jewry who are so preoccupied with trying to give their children a material inheritance that they disinherit their children of their spiritual heritage. They treat the child almost as if it were his lot to grow up to be a citizen of a world that is all body and mind, without soul. Our children have a right to a soul."

Dr. Pool lamented that parents are so busy making a living, they sometimes forget what is really important in life. They devote tremendous time and energy to material needs, but give scant attention to their own and their children's spiritual needs. Their children have the latest clothes, computers, technological inventions--but their homes don't reflect Jewish religious observances and traditions, don't manifest the joy and sanctity of Shabbat, don't echo with the sounds of Torah study and discussion. Even in those homes where religious observance may be higher, the observance may be a matter of rote and habit rather than a fulfillment of religious ideas and ideals.

If parents do not communicate a positive experience of Judaism to their children, they run the risk of disinheriting their children from their spiritual roots.

Many years ago, I met with an elderly member of our Congregation who was nearing his death. He had come to the United States from Europe as a young man; he worked hard; he married and had four children; he built a phenomenally successful business. He raised his children in luxury. He and his wife saw to it that their children went to the most elite private schools, attended the best colleges, drove the nicest cars etc. But they did not maintain a religious Jewish home, they did not give their children Jewish education beyond a Sunday school

level. The father worked 7 days a week in order to assure his family of a good, successful and happy life. This congregant was basically a good man. He had a deep Jewish identity, and was generous to Jewish charities.

As he approached the end of his life, he called to speak with me. With tears in his eyes, he told me that he could not understand what had happened with his family. After all, he was a good Jew, a devoted member of the Jewish people. He worked so hard for so many years to create a prosperous life for his family. Now, as the sun was setting on his life, he realized that he had amassed a huge material fortune--but had lost his children to Judaism. All four had married non-Jewish spouses; one of them had converted to Christianity and was a deacon in his church.

In the well known story, Faust sells his soul to the devil in order to achieve worldly success. At the end of his life, he realizes that the earthly success he had attained was essentially meaningless; he had traded his soul for empty and vain symbols of power. The story of Faust continues to resonate, because it repeats itself in so many lives. People lose sight of the ultimately important things, trading their souls for fleeting signs of material success. They not only lose their own souls; they disinherit the souls of their children.

The Torah tells us that our forefather Jacob, when he was about to die, called his children together. The Midrash suggests that Jacob was deeply concerned: would his children carry on the faith and ideals that were so dear to him, that he had tried so hard to communicate to them? To reassure him, the children said in unison, Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. Jacob was so pleased to hear this united affirmation of faith, that he responded: Blessed be His name and glorious sovereignty for ever and ever.

No matter how high or low our level of religious knowledge and observance is, we can all devote more and better time to the spiritual development of ourselves, our children and grandchildren. We all would like our children and grandchildren to affirm their Judaism and their Jewishness. We need to stay focused on this ultimate goal. We all have the right--and the deep need--for a soul.

Angel for Shabbat