Generational Continuity: Thoughts for Parashat Vayhi

View PDF



Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayhi

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 may 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".

In this week's Parasha, Jacob gives his blessing to his grandchildren, Joseph's sons, praying that "the angel who redeemed me from all evil will bless the lads; and let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth." Jacob wanted continuity from generation to generation; he wanted the grandchildren to cherish the names and ideals of their grandparents and forebears; he wanted the family to grow and prosper, spreading the word of God throughout the land.

These are the blessings we pray for our own children, grandchildren and generations yet to come. Od Avinu Hai, Am Yisrael Hai.