From Generation to Generation: Thoughts for Parashat Ha'azinu

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ha’azinu

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations…” (Devarim 32:7)

Jewish tradition is passed on from one generation to the next. The mystery of Jewish survival is really no mystery: it is the result of incredible faith and commitment on the part of parents and grandparents; it is the result of the younger generations taking hold of the tradition with full hearts and minds.

The following text is drawn from my article on the teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. It sheds light on the ideas and ideals that have characterized our people for thousands of years.

Halakhic Jews feel inextricably bound to all Jews, even those who are unsympathetic to them and their beliefs. "Judaism has stressed the wholeness and the unity of Knesset Israel, the Jewish community. The latter is not a conglomerate. It is an autonomous entity, endowed with a life of its own ….

However strange such a concept may appear to the empirical sociologist, it is not at all a strange experience for the halakhist and the mystic, to whom Knesset Israel is a living, loving and suffering mother" ("The Community," p. 9). In one of his teshuvah lectures, Rabbi Soloveitchik stated that "the Jew who believes in Knesset Israel is the Jew who lives as part of it wherever it is and is willing to give his life for it, feels its pain, rejoices with it, fights in its wars, groans at its defeats and celebrates its victories" (Al ha-Teshuvah, p. 98). By binding oneself to the Torah, which embodies the spirit and destiny of Israel, the believer in Knesset Israel thereby is bound to all the generations of the community of Israel, past, present and future.

The Rav speaks of two types of covenant which bind Jews to Knesset Israel. The berit goral, the covenant of fate, is that which makes a Jew identify with Jewishness due to external pressure. Such a Jew is made conscious of Jewish identity when under attack by anti-Semites; when Israel is threatened by its enemies; when Jews around the world are endangered because of their Jewishness. The berit goral is connected to Jewish ethnicity and nationalism; it reminds the Jew that, like it or not, he is a Jew by fate.

The berit yeud, the covenant of mission and destiny, links the Jew to the positive content of Jewishness. He is Jewish because he chooses the Jewish way of life, the Torah and halakha; he seeks a living relationship with the God of Israel. The berit yeud is connected with Jewish ideals, values, beliefs, observances; it inspires the Jew to choose to live as a Jew. The berit goral is clearly on a much lower spiritual level than the berit yeud; the ideal Jew should see Jewish identity primarily in the positive terms of the berit yeud. However, the Rav does not negate the significance of the berit goral. Even if a Jew relates to Jewishness only on the ethnic level, this at least manifests some connection to the Jewish people. Such individuals should not be discounted from Knesset Israel, nor should they be disdained as hopelessly lost as Jews. Halakhic Jews, although they cling to the berit yeud, must recognize their necessary relationship with those Jews whose connection to Jewishness is on the level of berit goral.

Ultimately, though, Jewish tradition is passed from generation to generation by those Jews who are committed to Torah and halakha. Thus, it is critical that all Jews be brought into the category of those for whom Jewishness is a positive, living commitment. Jewishness based on ethnicity will not ensure Jewish continuity. The Rav credited the masorah community with transmitting Judaism

from generation to generation. The masorah community is composed of those Jews for whom transmission of Torah and halakha is the central purpose of life. It was founded by Moses and will continue into the times of the Messiah. Members of the masorah community draw on the traditions of former generations, teach the present generation, plan for future generations. "The masorah community cuts across the centuries, indeed millenia, of calendaric time and unites those who already played their part, delivered their message, acquired fame, and withdrew from the covenantal stage quietly and humbly, with those who have not yet been given the opportunity to appear on the covenantal stage and who wait for their turn in the anonymity of the 'about to be'" ("The Lonely Man of Faith," p. 47).

The masorah community actually embodies two dimensions--the masorah community of the fathers and that of the mothers. The Rav clarifies this point by a personal reminiscence. "The laws of Shabbat, for instance, were passed on to me by my father; they are part of mussar avikha. The Shabbat as a living entity, as a queen, was revealed to me by my mother; it is a part of torat imekha. The fathers knew much about the Shabbat; the mothers lived the Shabbat, experienced her presence, and perceived her beauty and splendor. The fathers taught generations how to observe the Shabbat; mothers taught generations how to greet the Shabbat and how to enjoy her twenty-four hour presence" (“Tribute to the Rebbitzen of Talne," p. 77).

The Rav teaches that Knesset Israel is a prayerful community and a charitable community. "It is not enough to feel the pain of many, nor is it sufficient to pray for the many, if this does not lead to charitable action" ("The Community," p. 22). A responsible member of Knesset Israel must be spiritually awake, must be concerned for others, must work to help those in need. "The prayerful-charity community rises to a higher sense of communion in the teaching community, where teacher and disciple are fully united" ("The Community," p. 23). The community must engage in teaching, in transmitting, in passing the teachings of Torah to new generations.