

THE OLD MAN

Yizkor is a time that we remember all kinds of relatives and friends who were dear to us, especially parents and grandparents. It is these last two, parents and grandparents, but especially grandparents, who are the subject of my remarks this morning. These comments are based largely on the thoughts of my eminent teacher, R. Joseph B. Soleveitchik שליט"א.

שלושה נקראו אבות. The three people who were first called "fathers" amongst our people, were the three patriarchs -- Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Each transmitted his teaching -- what was later to become the great tradition of Judaism, the Masorah or Israel -- from father to son. The connection of a man to his grandson was mediated by his own son. Thus, the tradition of Abraham came to Jacob through Isaac.

Hence, the importance in Jewish history of father-son relationships. On the one hand, the father was instructed to teach his son: וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבָנֵיכֶם, ye shall teach (the Torah) diligently to your sons. On the other hand, when one man taught another, he was regarded as if he were his biological father: כִּל הַמְלֵמֵד בֶּן.
חֲבֵירוֹ תִּירָה כְּאִילוֹ יָלְדוֹ.

But I am even more impressed with the relations of grandfathers and grandsons and their ability to get along with each other.

This is symbolized by Jacob, who was the first one to be called a "grandfather" as such. Others "became old," but only Jacob was "the old man." About Abraham we read וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן, Abraham became old, "well-stricken" in years. But when Joseph meets his brothers the second time, and they do not recognize him, and he wants to ask how their father is, he says הֲשָׁלוֹם אֲבִיכֶם הֵיכֵן, "is all well with your old father?" " אֵל זָקֵן " in Biblical Hebrew may either mean "old father," or -- "grandfather." In the Midrash, Jacob is frequently called יִשְׂרָאֵל הַזָּקֵן, Israel the grandfather, or Israel the old man. And, by extension, all the Jewish people are called יִשְׂרָאֵל הַזָּקֵן.

Jacob, the "choicest of the patriarchs," was the first one to cross the generation gap. He was the first to create direct relationships with his grandchildren. Thus, when at the end of his life he gives his blessing to his grandchildren, he is not only stating his last will and testament, but describing an existential situation: אֶפְרַיִם וּמְנַשֶּׁה כִּי אֶפְרַיִם וּמְנַשֶּׁה יִהְיוּ לִי, Ephraim and Menassah shall be to me like my own children, Reuben and Simeon. Ephraim and Menassah's father was too busy being Prime Minister of a great empire to have

much time for his children. And so Joseph's father, Jacob, took over his duties, and befriended his grandchildren. Jacob, *אבא יוסף*, was the one who founded this profound relationship of love and affection, and even intellectual collegiality, with his grandchildren.

In the Mishnah, in *אבות*, R. Akiba speaks of the relationship of a father to his son. *אבא יוסף*, a father can bequeath to his son certain qualities that are his biologically or financially or culturally. Thus, if a father is handsome of appearance, the son is generally so. If the father is healthy and powerful, genetically the son generally follows the same pattern. If the father is wealthy, he will usually share it with his son. A father who is intelligent and wise will bequeath to his child perhaps the intellectual capacity which is his, and certainly will attempt to share with him his wisdom and the knowledge that he has acquired in his lifetime. And, often, longevity is genetically bequeathed from father to son.

But this Mishnah ends with one more element by R. Akiba: *והוא הקץ*, literally, "and in the number of generations before him, and that is the end." This last clause was highly problematical to the commentators. They were terribly perplexed by it, and it is difficult indeed to find an adequate explanation.

R. Soleveitchik interprets this passage as follows: *הדורות* represents man's ability to leap over one generation and establish direct and intimate contact with the one that follows it. It is the peculiar ability to use the stuff of Judaism, its teachings and its traditions, as the basis for a dialogue with other generations, despite the differences in cultural milieu -- thus, a Jacob was raised in rustic Canaan, and his grandsons in cosmopolitan Egypt, and yet they were able to converse with each other.

This is indeed a great *חידוש* that a father can give to his son -- namely, the ability to communicate with his son and daughter, with the grandchildren, in a meeting of "the number of generations.:

"*והוא הקץ*" refers to the *קץ הימים*, the "end of days," the coming of the Messiah. For the Messiah will come, and his advent will be noticed, when the generations of Jews will be re-integrated, when the *ממלכה* community will be reestablished and our ancient tradition revived in the hearts of the young.

Indeed, our Haftorah on this eighth day of Passover spoke of the coming of the Messiah. Who was the first to foretell his coming, according to the Sages? It was Jacob: *בקש יעקב לגלות*, it was Jacob who desired to reveal to his children the *קץ*, the "end of days," the coming of the Messiah, but unfortunately his prophetic spirit departed from

him. Jacob, the "old man," the grandfather, is the one who, by virtue of his talent for *מפד הזכות*, knows the secret of *קדוה*, the redemption at the end of days.

Permit me to turn autobiographical, as I suppose one must when discussing generation-gaps. I mention this as merely an example what I am sure others can describe, in other ways, from their own experiences. I was blessed with a great and unusual grandfather, *זיידל*. He was my teacher in Torah from the time I was about eight until I was 21. As I became older, I often marvelled at the ability of the two of us to communicate across the gap of so many decades. After all, we were so very different! I was a youngster, completely inexperienced in any aspect of life. He had come from a distant continent, through all kinds of wanderings, full of life's painful experiences. I was the product of sophisticated, modern New York. He came from the countryside of an area that cannot be identified without specifying the periods before the war -- sometimes Hungary, Poland Romania, Austria! So here we were: the village grandfather and the big-city grandson. I was highly learned in all the complex intricacies of baseball, and had committed to memory the baffling statistics of batting averages of all the leaders in this sport. My grandfather didn't even know what the National League was! He was filled with all kinds of Rabbinic and Hasidic lore, the relevance of which I sometimes doubted, and I was interested in science and literature and philosophy, and he had doubts as to the value of my interests, especially the latter two. We communicated in Yiddish -- he spoke Yiddish with an admixture of a few words of English to me, and I responded in a Yiddish which was more English than Yiddish. I came to this encounter fresh, and full of youthful energy. And then I looked into his eyes, large, sad eyes, occasionally tear-covered, eyes that bespoke sadness mixed with humor, understanding and love, affection and wisdom. As I gazed into those eyes, I thought then and I think even more now, what lay behind them, what memories reechoed in his head, what impressions and incidents that were painful and pleasurable, happy and tragic, concerning generations of people great and small, who had long passed into history. He was in the Indian Summer of his life, I in the early Spring. Could we ever learn to talk to each other?

But of course we did. He opened the Talmud -- and I am still beguiled and bewitched by the memory of the odor: the delicious, musty smell of old texts, mingled with the waft of nicotine from his cigarettes -- and the dialogue began. One of us began to recite the Gemara. He helped me as I stumbled through the text. But then I challenged him on a point, and he sought assistance from one older than himself. It was as if the door silently opened, and in walked someone, invisible, much older, but a very real presence. It might have been R. Yitzhak

Shmelkes, the Rabbi of Lemberg. But I would not accede to his authority, and I pulled in to my side another old man, also a Rabbi of Lemberg, R. Yosef Shaul Nathanson. As the four of us continued the discussion, other people came in from other generations. Soon the table was crowded. There were not only my grandfather and myself, and the two Rabbis of Lemberg, there was also Rashi, and his grandson, Rabenu Tam, and then there was Rambam and Ramban and Rashba... Soon sharp words were exchanged, we began criticising each other, we took sides and changed sides every few minutes. My objections had nothing to do with adolescent rebellion, and his answers had nothing to do with a put-down of a young upstart. The dialogue spread, and soon it became a symposium of the generations. The gap had been breached, the מפגש הדורות had been achieved. We were no longer just grandfather and grandson -- he was my friend, I his colleague. וזהו הקץ -- to this day my own personal, subjective, emotional picture of what the Messianic period will be like is -- just what I described!

On this occasion of Yizkor, we each think back upon the past, not only parents but also grandparents, and ponder that מפגש הדורות.

But today, when we read in Isaiah the prophecy of the Messiah, we must also look to the future, to our grandchildren or some day, with the help of God, our grandchildren-to-be.

If what we give to them, through our own children, is only this-worldly -- handsomeness and strength and wealth and intelligence and longevity -- this will not by itself hasten the redemption.

We must strive, even more, for מפגש הדורות, for the ability to relate and communicate to them directly in a Jewish dialogue. For those who can, there must be a study of Torah. By all means, grandparents must take their grandchildren with them to the synagogue to experience תפילה or prayer together. At the very least grandparents must initiate their grandchildren, not only their children, to a sense of responsibility for the Jewish community, to worrying and caring and concerning oneself, in cooperation, for Jewish causes.

When the מפגש הדורות will be an exercise in Jewish endeavor, וזהו הקץ, we shall be blessed with the circumstances of redemption and the coming of Messiah.