

A Thought on Parashat Vayechi 'Living the Mesorah'

By Jeremy Richards

In Memory of my Dear Parents, a"h

L'ilui Nishmos Yitzchok Ben Nachman Halevi a"h and Yenta Bas Yisroel a"h

לעלוי נשמת יצחק בן נחמן הלוי ע"ה ולעלוי נשמת יענטע בת ישראל ע"ה



The old Rebbe walks into the classroom crowded with students who are young enough to be his grandchildren. The Rebbe is Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993). He enters as an old man with wrinkled face, his eyes reflecting the fatigue and sadness of old age. The Rebbe is seated and sees before him rows of young, beaming faces, clear eyes radiating the joy of being young. The Rebbe asks himself, "Can there be a dialogue between such an old teacher and such young students who are enjoying the spring of their lives?" He starts the shiur, uncertain as to how it will proceed. Suddenly, the door opens and an old man, much older than the Rebbe, enters. It is the grandfather of the Rebbe, Reb Chaim Brisker (1853-1918). The door opens again, and in walks Rabbi Shabtai Cohen, known as the Shach (1622-1663). Many more visitors arrive, from the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including Rabbeinu Tam (1090-1171), Rashi (1040-1105), Rambam (1135-1204), Ravad (1125-1198), and Rashba (1245-1310). Then Rabbi Akiva (40-135) enters, along with other giants of his time. All take their seats.

The Rebbe introduces all of the guests to his students, and the dialogue commences. The Rambam states a halachah, the Ravad disagrees. Some students interrupt to defend the Rambam, expressing themselves harshly against the Ravad, as young people do. The Rebbe softly corrects the students and suggests more restrained tones. The Rashba smiles gently. The Rebbe analyses the students' point, then Rabbeinu Tam (grandfather of Rashi) is asked for his opinion. A discussion between multiple generations starts up. Young students debate with earlier generations with an air of daring familiarity, but all speak one language, all are committed to a common vision. In this one room the process of מסורה - Mesorah - takes place, with Torah energetically transmitted across centuries, millennia, from antiquity to the Middle Ages to Modern Day.

After a three-hour shiur the Rebbe emerges from the room feeling young and rejuvenated. He has defeated age. The students, however, look exhausted. In the מסורה experience, years play no role.

(Adapted from 'Man of Faith in the Modern World – Reflections of the Rav, Volume Two, Abraham R. Besdin pp.21-23)

The incident described above was presented by Rabbi Soloveitchik as his personal experience. In conjuring this scene, Rav Soloveitchik enchants us with a magical journey into his imagination. However, this imagery was not intended to be taken as fanciful make-believe. As already intimated, Rabbi Soloveitchik wanted to convey that this was the experience he encountered each time he sat in his shiur, teaching his students. As they learnt and debated Talmudic discussions, they were joined daily by numerous rabbinic giants from previous generations, and the involvement of those personalities was so vivid as to give the sense that they indeed were present and seated in the room, taking part in the shiur, offering their opinions for equal scrutiny with those of the Rebbe and his talmidim.

The charming passage we have just enjoyed concludes an essay entitled, 'The First Jewish Grandfather,' in which Rav Soloveitchik explains the important "Mesorah relationship" between a grandparent and grandchild which, he teaches, represents the bridging of generations so symbolic of and necessary for spiritual continuity. He writes that in the Mesorah (transmission

of Torah) community there is a bond between old and young, distance in time is bridged, and past and present generations are contemporaries.

Who, then, was the first Jewish grandfather? In establishing direct communication with his grandchildren, writes Rabbi Soloveitchik, Yaakov Avinu laid the foundation for the dialogue of the generations. Moreover, in making the following pronouncement, he established the sense of closeness we have with the past: "Now your sons, who were born to you in the Land of Egypt, before I came to you in Egypt, are mine. Ephraim and Menashe shall be mine, no less than Reuven and Shimon." (Bereishis 48:5) Rashi notes, on these words, that Ephraim and Menashe received portions in the later division of Eretz Yisrael, together with Yaakov's sons.

Avraham and Yitzchak transmitted their spiritual heritage to their sons, writes Rav Soloveitchik, not to their grandsons. The influence of these grandfathers on their grandchildren was indirect, but Yaakov Avinu related directly to his grandchildren, in direct dialogue. In addition to blessing Ephraim and Menashe before his death, we are informed that Yaakov learnt regularly with Ephraim (Rashi, Bereishit 48:1 Midrash Tanchuma Vayechi). It is therefore appropriate that our nation is called, 'Israel,' or 'B'nei Yisrael,' for it was he who laid the first building blocks for the Jewish People by communicating across generations, which is the secret of גמטריה. This is why Rav Soloveitchik gives Yaakov Avinu the title, 'the First Jewish Grandfather.' It is not a biological reference, but one that credits its bearer with initiating the crucially important process of גמטריה, which drives, sustains and defines Torah Judaism.

We can well understand the significance of grandparents seeing their grandchildren grow up and interacting with them. Parents do their best to raise their children to be good, balanced, caring, G-d-fearing individuals, but it is only when they see their grandchildren growing up in a way that meets those same aspirations that they can discern a measure of personal success in their own parenting. In other words, while it is certainly the job of Jewish parents to effectively transmit Torah values to their own children, they do so also with future grandchildren and subsequent generations in mind. Becoming grandparents then affords us a new perspective, one which Rabbi Soloveitchik calls, "generation awareness," and which enables us to observe the contribution we have made to the national Jewish future.

My father, ע"ה, was once expressing to our community rabbi his pleasure at observing his grandchildren practising aspects of Torah and mitzvot even at young and tender ages. The rabbi explained to my father how parents would often inform him of their children's successes in sport, athletics, chess, and a variety of secular pursuits. The parents would describe their

feelings of 'nachas' as they listed their children's accomplishments. In response, the rabbi would smile, congratulate them, and outwardly share in their joy. "However," the rabbi added, "when grandparents tell me how much they delight in seeing their grandchildren saying berachot before food and drink, reciting Birkat Hamazon after meals, and reviewing their Torah learning, that's something else entirely. This is because," he noted, "there's no nachas like Yiddische nachas."

The rich personal nachas we feel upon seeing our children and grandchildren learning to naturally apply and practise Halochah in their own lives is the joy that arises out of a tangible sense of personal engagement in Mesorah that will guarantee the continuity of Torah Judaism. However, that joy must necessarily be preceded by a deliberate and purposeful effort to train our children in the practice of mitzvot. Such training will most commonly be described in terms of the mitzvah of 'Chinuch' - education, training, inducting our children in Torah ways. However, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch would point us also in the direction of the mitzvah, 'Kibbud Av va'Aim,' the fifth of the Ten Commandments, to honour one's parents. Rav Hirsch explains this mitzvah squarely in relation to the safeguarding and perpetuation of the *מסורה*, or Jewish tradition. In his characteristic style, he writes:

"...and tradition depends solely on the faithful transmission by parents to children and on the willing acceptance by children from the hands of their parents. So that the continuance of G-d's whole great institution of Judaism rests entirely on the theoretical and practical obedience of children to parents, and *כבוד אב ואם* - honouring parents - is the basic condition for the eternal existence of the Jewish Nation." (Rav S.R. Hirsch on Shemot 20:12)

In this light, the mitzvah to honour parents is actually a directive to preserve the *מסורה*, and the duty is at least as much on parents as it is on children. *כבוד אב ואם* is not a perk to reward parents for being parents, but an imperative upon which the very continuity of Judaism depends. It must, therefore, compel both parents and children in its fulfilment. This insight is a fascinating comment on the importance and immediate relevance of *מסורה* and our key role in proactively sustaining it.

We have seen, then, that Mesorah – the intergenerational transmission of Torah and Mitzvot - is a matter of direct and vital personal engagement rather than an ex post facto description of Jewish tradition; it is a mandate to live and learn and teach and practise Torah and Mitzvot, ever conscious of our personal responsibility to safeguard our precious and eternal heritage long into the future. Mesorah happens in the Beit Hamedrash and in the classroom. It happens at the Shabbat table and on the way to shul and school. Mesorah is helping small hands use a keili (vessel, cup) for netilat yadayim, or supporting slightly larger hands in holding a siddur

or lulav, and later leading mature minds through a piece of Gemara with the commentaries of Rashi and the Tosafot. And we keep מסורה alive by linking and bonding old and young and bridging generations, and, in doing so, we truly earn the name and accolade, 'בני ישראל.'



Wishing everyone a Good Shabbos,

...and much Yiddische nachas from their children and grandchildren!

Jeremy