

M'dor L'dor - From Generation to Generation

It was our daughter's birthday. So, it wasn't surprising that her little brother was having a bit of a rough day. His mood had already soured by breakfast when his sister got to choose the morning menu. There were regular expressions of frustration about what she got to do and he did not, protestations appealing to his parents' commitment to fairness and justice in the world.

Wanting to offer him some support and encouragement, Michele empathized. "It's really hard being a younger sibling sometimes. I know how it is." "You don't understand!" he scolded. "I do, buddy. I was a younger sibling too." "Yeah," he replied in exasperation, "but that was back in the 1900's!!!" Touché!

Indeed, while only a hair's breath away in the grand scheme of humanity's time on earth, our parents' youth can feel like ancient history to us. For all that we may share with our moms and dads - physical appearance, mannerisms, attitudes, or beliefs - we also recognize that we are not of their generation and that, therefore, our life experiences must somehow be substantively different from what theirs have been.

Historically, this has been especially true in our nation. Already, in the early 1800's French political scientist, Alexis de Tocqueville, said of America, "each generation is a new people."¹ A desire for change in this country – and rapid change at that – has always been hardwired into our collective psyche, making this place fertile ground for youth who want to take on dramatically different worldviews, norms, and habits from those of their parents and grandparents. Yet, among social scientists, the sense is that the current gap between generations is particularly wide. I am not merely speaking about Millennials' frequently heard claims that Baby Boomers have ruined the world for everyone else, nor the Boomers' assertions that Millennials only care about Instagram and avocado toast.

Regardless of whether or not these and other intergenerational slurs are grounded in truth or misperception – and it is likely some of both – it is clear from sociological research that, indeed, there is a pretty dramatic gap in our nation between young and old today. Drawing upon decades of research conducted by the Pew Research Center – some of it during his time as their Executive Vice President – author Paul Taylor delineates these differences when he writes:

"Young and old in America are poles apart. Demographically, politically, economically, socially, and technologically, the generations are more different from each other now than at any time in living memory. [Here are some] of the ways:

- *They vote differently.*
- *Their economic fortunes have diverged...*
- *Their families are different.*
- *Their gender roles are converging.*

¹ 'Democracy in America', de Tocqueville, A. (1835)

- *[Young and old] have different ideas about the role of government...*
- *They have a different racial and ethnic makeup...*
- *They have different perceptions of global warming...*
- *They have different military experiences...*
- *They have different views about American exceptionalism...*
- *They have a different take on the digital revolution...*
- *They have different appetites for news...*
- *[And they] have different views of religion...[with] Millennials being the least religiously connected generation in modern American history.”²*

So, to the Millennials celebrating Rosh Hashanah with us over the next two days...thanks for being here!

Like many, I'm sure, I began this Rosh Hashanah with several generations of our family gathered around the festival meal table, and for Jews, this feels right. Just yesterday morning we read these words from Torah, words spoken passionately by Moses to the Children of Israel who are preparing to enter the Promised Land: “You stand this day, all of you, before your God— all the men of Israel, the women and children - to enter into the covenant with your God. God enters into this sacred relationship, not with you alone, but...also with those future generations who are not with us here this day.”³

And ever since, ours has been a tradition deeply committed to intergenerational dissemination of wisdom, commitments, stories, life skills, and moral values. Just run a Google search for “*dor l'dor*” – one of several common Hebrew phrases which convey transmission of precious matters “from generation to generation,” and you will find page after page of Israel trips, summer camp programs, and religious school curricula. All of them adopted this title because they see themselves as critical players in meaningfully connecting one Jewish generation to the next as we seek to keep our millennia-old traditions vibrant and compelling for the children and grandchildren who follow us. This is – to be sure – one of our most prominent goals as a people.

So, what is a tradition so committed to intergenerational conveyance of our most precious inheritances to do in the face of such stark generational divides in our time?

I believe that, here too, Torah – and in particular the stories of the first generations of the Jewish people - may be instructive for us. But before I continue, I must pause to note something worth stating explicitly. When we speak about generational trends and experiences we are, by definition, misrepresenting some portion of that group. Or, in Paul Taylor's words, “...[T]here are as many different personality types *within* a generation as across generations...”⁴ If I discuss a trait of your generation that you do not believe describes you, you may well be right. I seek here only to reflect trends as

² The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown, Paul Taylor and the Pew Research Center, PublicAffairs, New York, 2015, pp. 61-62

³ Deuteronomy 30:9-15

⁴ Taylor, pp. 63-64

articulated by those who study generational differences, not to speak to the personal experiences of every person in every generation.

So, let us begin, then with the Baby Boomers, a group that I would suggest shares a number of characteristics with Abraham and Sarah – our people’s first generation. Abraham’s name means “Father of a Great Multitude,” and the Baby Boomers earned their fame simply by being born in tremendous numbers between the years 1946 and ‘64. The Boomers took significant steps away from the generation that proceeded them. Raised by parents from the “Silent Generation,” who had survived wars and experienced the Great Depression, many Boomers rebelled against the traditionalist ways of their elders, and in so doing helped to drive our society in bold new directions. Similarly, Abraham heard a call that drew him away from the idolatrous and polytheistic home of his father, Terach, and towards a new Promised Land. Abraham’s insistence on justice and a willingness to stand up to God’s authority in defense of the potentially innocent people of Sodom and Gomorrah is akin to the Boomer-fueled revolutionary movements surrounding the rightful place of women in our nation, the injustices of war, and the need for civil rights for all Americans regardless of skin color.

And like Abraham and Sarah who prayed most of their lives for the ability to bring a child into this world only to have Abraham put his relationship with God before his relationship with his son when he attempted to offer him up as a sacrifice, Baby Boomers have been described as both extremely loyal and committed to their children while also being the generation to normalize the 60-hour work week, often focusing on professional advancement while sacrificing quality family time.

Which brings us to Isaac, beloved son of Abraham and Sarah, whose seminal life event was his brush with death at the hands of his father, the soul-stirring tale we will hear read tomorrow morning. The Torah does not explicitly say whether this moment scarred Isaac or stunted his development, but it is clear that his life is not nearly as groundbreaking as those of his parents. The same has been said of the next cohort in American history as well...Generation X – my generation of Americans born roughly between 1965 and 1980.

Neil Howe, a demographer by trade, “noted the delay in the naming of this cohort saying: ‘Over 30 years after their birthday, they didn’t have a name. I think that’s germane.’”⁵ At first, there were attempts to name our generation based on our relationship to the one that preceded us... ‘Post-Boomers’ – in much the same way that the Torah seeks to establish Isaac’s character by stating, “This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac.”⁶

In both cases, the message is clear...what one primarily needs to know about this generation is that it is the progeny of the previous generation. Isaac’s life story consists mostly of him retracing the same steps his father had taken, interacting with the same kings, even re-digging the same wells. What a powerful metaphor for a child unable to

⁵ “From Diversity to Intergenerativity: Addressing the Mystery and Opportunities of Generation X,” in *Generations*, Vol. 41, No 3, Fall 2017, by Whitehouse, Peter J.; Flippin, Candace Steele.

⁶ Genesis 25:19

get out from under his parent's shadow. Likewise, Abram and Sarai receive transformational name changes from God to become Abraham and Sarah. Isaac is always just Isaac.

And merely two verses after we are introduced to Isaac as being – first and foremost - Abraham's son, the Torah text begins to focus on Isaac and Rebecca's efforts to have children and his role as father to the next great generation, as represented by our patriarch Jacob, who will also receive a momentous name change from on high when he becomes Israel...the namesake of our people.

And such is our lot in Gen X as well. We Gen X'ers are the bridge between two mighty, ambitious, groundbreaking, and oft-discussed generations. Also known as the "latchkey generation" due to being the first cohort to grow up with an increasing number of two-working-parent homes, Gen X has grown to double down on the Boomers' commitment to family, becoming known for our desire for greater work-life balance. Isaac was the only patriarch to never leave the homeland. Ours is the generation that wants more time at home. Boomers and Millennials have names that connect them to major events of their youths. We are simply "X"...a chiasm bridging from one great and mighty generation to the next, with our own important roles to play in bringing harmony between the two.

Which brings us to the Millennials, those born approximately between 1981 and the close of the millennium. They are known to be quite competitive, not unlike our forefather, Jacob, who grabbed hold of his twin brother's heel in an attempt to drag him back into the womb so that he might be the firstborn.⁷ Millennials are extremely spiritual – if not always religiously affiliated – like our patriarch, Jacob, who has mystical visions of ladders that ascend straight to heaven even as he repeatedly puts conditions on the terms of his covenantal relationship with God.

Millennials are oft-described as having been coddled by parents, teachers, and coaches in the age of "everyone gets a trophy," like Jacob who always preferred to stay close to his home and to his mother. And, like the self-assured Jacob who convinces his brother to sell him his birthright for a bowl of stew, Millennials tend to be confident and optimistic even when the odds are stacked against them.

So, how might we frame the challenge of not only coexisting but thriving together among the not three, but six⁸ generations currently living in our families, nation, and world, each with their own unique generational experiences and outlooks?

First, as is true in the Book of Genesis, each of these generations has its own unique contributions to make to the unfolding story of a people. The same, I suggest, holds true of the generations coexisting among us today.

⁷ Genesis 25:26

⁸ Greatest Generation, Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and not-yet-named

Second, for those in the younger generations looking back on those that preceded us, I share a teaching from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who wrote: “Mark Twain said it most pithily. ‘When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.’ ...[T]he truth in Mark Twain’s insight,” writes Sacks, is that “[we need] time and distance to see how much we owe our parents and how much of them lives on in us... [In the Torah,] Jewish history begins with the words, ‘God said to Abraham, Go from your land, your birthplace and your father’s house to a land I will show you.’⁹ This is the boldest beginning of any account of a life in the Hebrew Bible... Perhaps it is only as we grow older that we are able to go back and read [this] story again, and realize the significance of the passage at the end of the *previous* [Torah portion].

It [reads]: ‘Terach took his son Abram, his grandson Lot... and his daughter-in-law Sarai...and together they set out from Ur...to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there.’¹⁰ It turns out, in other words, that Abraham left his father’s house *long after* he had left his land and his birthplace. His birthplace was in Ur, in what is today southern Iraq, but he only separated from his father in Harran, in what is now northern Syria. *Terach, Abraham’s father, accompanied him for the first half of his journey.* He went with his son at least part of the way. When we are young we hear the enchanting – indeed empowering – story of Abraham breaking his father’s idols, with its message that a child can sometimes be right and a parent wrong, especially when it comes to spirituality and faith.

Only much later in life do we hear the far deeper truth – hidden in the guise of a simple genealogy at the end of the *previous* [portion] – that Abraham was actually completing a journey his father began.”¹¹

We who are blessed to be in relationship with the generations that preceded our own ought to bear in mind that – in so many cases - we are only able to write our chapters of history because we are extending the legacy which was bequeathed to us.

And for those of us who are among the older generations now looking in bewilderment at the young among us, I offer this story shared by my dear friend, Rabbi David Wolfman, during a time in his rabbinate when he was piloting a brand-new prayer book with his congregation at Shabbat services. At the end of the evening’s service, he asked people in the room for feedback, and many of the congregants noted how much they enjoyed this refreshing and renewed take on the old liturgy. Late in the discussion, Susan, one of the congregation’s most senior and dedicated members, raised her hand. When asked her opinion of the new prayer book she replied, “I hated it. It feels completely foreign and uncomfortable to me. And...I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure that we adopt it in our community, and I will be making a donation to help make it so. This new prayer book isn’t for me. It’s for the generations that follow

⁹ Genesis 12:1

¹⁰ Genesis 11:31

¹¹ Journey of the Generations by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, <http://rabbisacks.org/journey-of-the-generations-lech-lecha-5776/>

me, and my job is to help make sure that they remain as connected to these traditions as I have throughout my life.” It is our obligation to pass our sacred traditions, values, and norms on to those who follow us, and it is also our responsibility to do so in a way that they are able to receive this inheritance, to embrace it, make it their own, and figure out how to pass it on to the generations that follow them someday.

And finally, we should remember that the story of our people’s first generations does not end with Jacob, just as our modern-day cohorts will not conclude with the Millennials. Jacob’s generation gave birth to the children who grew to become the patriarchs of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, to whom I will return when we are together next week on Yom Kippur. Among Jacob’s children was Joseph, the dreamer who spent his entire life speaking truth to power and envisioning a brighter future for his people. And following The Millennials are the as-of-yet unnamed generation of children born between 2000 and now, among them the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida who are raising their voices to speak truth to power as they loudly demand a brighter future for themselves and their children. Among them, my son and his generation, who may feel now as though their parents and grandparents couldn’t possibly understand them or their life experiences, but who will someday - I hope – realize that their life journeys are an extension of our own, walked along a path that we will all share until we can accompany them no more.

May this new year of 5779 be a year in which – to paraphrase the prophet Malachi – the hearts of parents turn towards their children, and the hearts of children turn towards their parents¹² – the hearts of each generation turning to look both backward and ahead as we serve as sacred links, connecting sacred past with vibrant future.

¹² Malachi 3:23