



RABBI AARON

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GOLDSCHIEDER

The First Jewish Great-Grandfather

Just after concluding the holiday of Chanukah many of us may relate to the following feeling: We are experiencing a tinge of sadness. A gloomy sentiment sets in knowing that a long winter season lies ahead and we must now wait months until the next celebration in the Jewish calendar.

A Childhood Memory

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt”l touched on this post-Chanukah emotion when he shared the following memory from his youth. He remembered one particular frosty morning in which he and his classmates in the small *cheder* were feeling lazy and listless. The holiday of Chanukah had just concluded. The cold days and long frigid nights of winter were in full force in his White Russian village of Chaslovitz.

That morning the young boys were chanting the first verses of *Parshat Vayigash* in a dull monotone, in Hebrew and in the Yiddish vernacular.

They read the opening verses of Parshat Vayigash: “Then Yehudah approached him and said, If you please my lord, let your servant speak a word in my lord’s ear, and let not your anger flare up against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh. My lord asked his servants saying: Have you a father or brother? We said to my lord: We have an elderly father and a young child of his old age.”

The *melamed* was determined to break the drab mood of the boys that morning. He suddenly turned to the young Yosef Ber and asked him, “What does the Torah mean, “Do you have a father?” *Ha’yesh Lachem Av?* It goes without saying that every person has a father. Yosef had something else in mind when he posed this question. Yosef was eager to know whether the brothers were committed to their origin: “*Ha’yesh lachem Av?*” Are you rooted in your father as a foundation of your existence? Or are you insolent and arrogant and deny your dependence on your father?”

Adding to His Melamed’s Teaching

Years later, speaking at the simcha of a dear student, Rabbi Soloveitchik built on this idea of his childhood Chabad *melamed*. He suggested that this notion can be applied to interpret the second phrase in the same verse. “Have you a brother?” Yosef was not

interested in knowing whether they had another biological brother. Yosef wanted to know: 'Do you consider future generations as well? How will you effectively transmit your father's message to the next generation? We have a bright, vivacious, talented young child, our younger brother, who represents the words of tomorrow - how will we ensure that the continuity of our faith is transferred forward?'

The Rav maintained that this message is not only spotlighted here but is a theme that is broadcasted consistently throughout the book of *B'reishit*. The Rav expressed it this way: "What does Judaism demand of a Jew? A rendezvous between the *av zaken* and the *yeled zekunim*. That is our tradition: a merger between past tradition and a vision of the future" (*Darosh Darash Yosef* pp. 104-106).

We will see that as the book of B'reishit comes to a close, the theme of '*shalshet hadorot*', often referred to today as 'Jewish continuity', becomes even more pronounced.

Yaakov Surpassed the Other Avot

Rabbi Soloveitchik suggested the intriguing notion that there was one distinct way in which Yaakov surpassed Avraham and Yitzchak. Yaakov emerges as the supreme *Ba'al Hamesorah*. He symbolizes *mesorah*, sustaining and setting in motion the chain of tradition, most powerfully. He bridges the generation gap and triumphantly transmits Torah to his children and grandchildren after him.

Rabbi Soloveitchik exquisitely identifies

the following five examples spotlighting Yaakov's success in this sphere.

1. **17 and 17:** The story of Yaakov and his sons in *Parshat Vayeishev* begins by stating that Yosef was seventeen years old. The story then concludes in *Parshat Vayechi* by stating that for seventeen years Yaakov lived in Egypt before leaving this world. This is not a coincidence. The Rav suggested that the seventeen years of teachings when Yosef was a young man was responsible for Yosef's tenacity and persistence in times of distress as well as times of success. Not only was Yaakov successful in inculcating his core values in the heart of his young son, Yaakov now recognized the need to fortify Yosef, the middle-aged viceroy of Egypt, against all temptations associated with the exercise of power. This took Yaakov seventeen additional years of continuous teaching; the same number originally required to fashion Yosef's personality as a lad (*Chumash Mesoras HaRav*, p.350).

2. **Grandchildren:** Yaakov's relationship with Menashe and Ephraim, his grandchildren, was so powerful that he made a startling declaration: "Ephraim and Menashe shall be mine like Reuven and Shimon" (48:5). He converted them into his own children and declared that they would receive two portions in the Land of Israel. Thus, Yaakov transmitted the *mesorah* fully not only to one generation, but to two generations. (*Man of Faith in the Modern World*, Besdin, p. 18).

3. **Why 'Bnei Yisrael'?:** Rabbi Solovetichik provided a beautiful interpretation as to

why we, the Jewish people, are called *Bnei Yisrael* and *Beit Yaakov* as opposed to *Bnei Avraham* or *Bnei Yitzchak*. Yaakov most mightily symbolizes the *mesorah*. We carry the name of the forefather who represents this characteristic in order that future generations absorb this message. We have the same job: to receive, then guard, and pass the Torah teachings down to the next generations. That is the essence of Judaism (*The March of Centuries*, Ginsburg, p.xxii).

The following story told by Rabbi Soloveitchik about his eminent grandfather Reb Chaim of Brisk captures this splendid theme which was so dear to the Rav:

“In Brisk there was a *melamed* who could only take on one additional student, and the choice fell between a father and his son, both of whom were in need of the *melamed*. The parties involved turned to Reb Chaim for guidance. The Brisker Rav ruled that the *melamed* should teach the son even though the father was also an intelligent man. This ruling seemed to contradict the talmudic statement “If he has himself to teach and his son to teach, he takes precedence over his son (*Kiddushin* 29b). However, Reb Chaim knew the personalities of this father and his son. Reb Chaim felt that the father was only capable of learning but not of passing it on to the next generation. The son, however, would not only be able to learn but would also be able to transmit the Torah to the generation after him. Therefore the son took precedence over the father. This is in accordance with another dictum: “He who teaches his

grandson Torah, the Scripture regards the grandson as though he received it directly from Mount Sinai” (*Kiddushin* 30a). In other words, the transmitting of the Torah from generation to generation is the ultimate goal of the study of Torah” (*The Rav*, Vol. 1, p.228).

4. **Zaken:** Yaakov is distinguished in that he is frequently called “the old one” (*zaken*) or “old Israel (*Yisrael Sava*) in the Torah and the Midrash. This is despite the fact that Avraham and Yitzchak lived longer. He never achieved their longevity. Moreover, the appellation *zaken* is sometimes used without even mentioning his name, it being understood that the reference is to Yaakov. This unique title, said the Rav, is a reflection of the fact that he was the first patriarch to establish direct communication with his grandchildren (*Man of Faith in the Modern World*, Besdin, p.18).

5. **The Shema’s Meaning:**

Finally, Yaakov in the last days of his life was most concerned with the continuity of *Yahadut*. He gathers all of the children around him before leaving this world. We relive that moment and absorb this lesson with each reading of the *Shema* daily. In the words of the Rav: “In prayer, we experience the presence of God, we stand near and commune with Him. In reading the Shema, by contrast, we enter the presence of those persons who walked with Him, we stand in their shadow...” (*Mesorat HaRav Siddur*, p. 272)

In our daily practice of reciting the opening verse of *Shema*, we immediately

add the words “Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom.” This practice goes back to Yaakov and his sons at their last encounter (Pesachim 56a):

Yaakov wished to reveal to his sons the end of days, but the Holy Spirit withdrew from him. He said, “Perhaps, Heaven forbid, there is a defect in my bed...His sons said to him: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Just as there is only One in your heart, so there is only One in our hearts.” Then did our father Yaakov recite, “Blessed be the name of His Glorious kingdom for ever and ever.”

Yosef, A Great-Grandfather

Stunningly, Yaakov’s achievement of being the *Ba’al Hamesorah* par excellence is emulated by his son Yosef. In the concluding verses of the book of B’reishit we find the following verse, that perhaps is overlooked: “Yosef saw the children of a third generation born to Ephriam” (*B’reishit* 50:23). Yosef, said the Rav, understood the secret of the *mesorah* and tried to emulate Yaakov. Yosef actually attained a higher measure than his father in this regard. The Rav cited the comment of Ibn Ezra who underscored that Yosef in his role as a great-grandfather helped raise his precious great-grandchildren (See Rashi on the verse who makes the same point). The first book of the Torah concludes by teaching that Yosef reached out one generation further than Yaakov did (*Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Bereishis*, p. 372).

The Rav life’s mission was to transmit the Torah of his forebearers to a post-

Holocaust generation in the new world of America. The Rav would often humbly remark that his role in life was to be a *melamed*, to impart Torah wisdom to his students. Like Yaakov and Yosef before him, he reached out and ‘bridged the generations’ to countless individuals, families and communities. Indeed, Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik was one of the 20th centuries most remarkable and illustrious *ba’alei hamesorah*. Undoubtedly, he advocated that each of us passionately pursue this most noble mission. ■

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