

GENERATIONS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In Jewish life, family generations have always played a prominent role. We are bidden to procreate and create generations, whether through actual biological children, students and disciples, intellectual works and contributions or memories carried on by friends and colleagues. In fact we see ourselves mainly through our generations, through their behavior and accomplishments.

The wisdom of King Solomon taught us that "generations leave and generations come but the world remains forever" - so the task to build the world physically, spiritually and socially always remains. It is the primary challenge of all generations for all time. It is also the never changing challenge that taxes our existence and makes no compromise in its demands upon us.

All of this was made abundantly clear to me this week at the circumcision ceremony for my newest great grandson. The Lord has blessed me, allowing me to see a fourth generation in this handsome (what else?) squalling infant. I think of my father and grandfather, my mother and all of my relatives of previous generations when I see my great grandson. I am reminded of the quip that my teacher in the yeshiva told me almost sixty years ago: "If your grandparents and your grandchildren are both equally proud of you and your accomplishments, then you are probably alright."

Previous generations make us accountable, whether we wish to be or not. Seeing my great grandchild made me wonder what his opinion of me will be. We are accountable to succeeding generations as well. We all pray to be loved and remembered in a positive vein.

But the judgments of future time and history are not clear to us now, so we can only do our best, follow our traditions and Torah and hope that the future will be kind to us.

There is a tradition of rebellion regarding the relationship of one generation to the previous ones. Nineteenth century Eastern European Jewish life was a hotbed of youthful rebellion against the previous norms and structure of Jewish life. The secularism, assimilation and apathy of Jewish spirit that marks much of our current Jewish society are a product of this discontinuity of generations.

The Holocaust was another major and tragic fraying of the bonds of Jewish generations. Willfully or by negligence, most Jews today lack the bond of generations that is so necessary for meaningful Jewish life and survival. And, it is not only past generations that are missing but future ones as well. Inter-marriage, approval of homosexual behavior, smaller numbers of Jewish children, rampant

abortions, all combine to diminish hopes for future generations of Jews.

Familial and generational disruptions in Jewish life spell disaster both for the individual and the people of Israel generally. We cannot have Judaism without Jews. So the infant great grandson that I was privileged to hold in my hands this week is really a vote of confidence in the Jewish future and in the eternity of Israel.

One of the outstanding statistics that leap out at one when reading about the years immediately after the Holocaust is the large number of babies born to survivors in the years 1945 to 1948. This creation of Jewish generations under and after the worst of all conditions of human life is the supreme attestation to the eternity and resilience of the Jewish people.

Obviously, generations cannot be judged solely on the basis of quantity and numbers. The role of the individual is always paramount in Jewish life. Even when one is blessed with generations, both previous and succeeding ones, it is up to the individual himself and herself as to the future of the Jewish people. Everyone has to contribute according to one's gifts and talents. Everyone has to feel the responsibility upon one's self and not rely on one's pedigree of greatness or on the projected achievements or grandchildren or great grandchildren.

Every person eventually is judged by his/her own behavior and actions. Generations are important and great but are not the guarantors of success and achievement. Eisav came from Avraham and Yitzchak and Rabi Akiva came from Senchariv.

The power of the individual to choose one's course in life is never diminished. It may certainly be influenced by the concept of generations that I have discussed here but it is never wholly decided by that concept alone. I along with you pray for healthy, successful, pious generations. But, that has to be earned. May we all merit truly upright Jewish generations.

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