

Bhaalotecha: The Good Old Days Moshe Taragin

“We want fish, We want fish”! These ridiculous chants boomed through the Jewish camp as an angry mob clamored for a return to Egypt. Astonishingly, the hordes demanded a return to Egypt, a return to oppression and a return to the puny and putrid scraps of fish they received at the end of each dreadful day of labor. People always yearn for the “good old days” but, often, those old days weren’t that good to begin with. What lies at the heart of this illusion about the good old days? What incited this ludicrous demonstration in the desert?

In part, the Jews were suffering from a form of “prisoner anxiety”. Freedom carries great weight and great personal responsibility. Often the burden of freedom is too difficult to bear, especially for people who have enjoyed the tranquility of a life without choice. Imprisonment and slavery snatch away freedom of choice, and relieve us of the heavy burden of decision making. The former Jewish slaves now faced a frightening march through the desert as well as a looming challenge of conquering the promised land. As adversity set in, it was easier to “flee” these challenges and escape back to their prior state of slavery – a world without 'heavy' expectations and a world in which they could rely upon their daily fish as a "given". Facing a choice between fish and freedom these panicked slaves chose fish.

In addition to fearing their freedom, the Jews fell into a well-known psychological trap – the deception of nostalgia. Nostalgia allows our memory to selectively choose moments from our past, which, when dusted off and polished, appear shinier than our dreary present. We recall our past in a manner that our brains choose to remember it, and we imaginatively reinvent and glorify that past. As the past is unaffected by the struggles and hardships of the present, it always seems more radiant, more dazzling and more perfect. Often, anxiety about our current state, drives us into unrealistic memory of a "better" past.

Sometimes we experience collective nostalgia – not about our personal past but about past generations. Facing problems and challenges in our own societies we often look to previous societies as more successful versions of the human experiment. We convince ourselves that our world is dysfunctional and beyond

repair; once convinced, we exonerate ourselves from efforts to improve our contemporary condition. Personal and collective nostalgia often provide easy escapes.

For Jews, the challenges of "generational nostalgia" are particularly complex. We live with acute historical consciousness and we reference our collective past and compare it to the present. As we stream our contemporary experiences alongside the past, we are often nostalgic about past generations, viewing them as religiously and spiritually superior to our own fallen state. This view is captured by the concept of "nitkatnu hadorot" which asserts that later generations have literally become "smaller" and are in constant state of religious decline. Is this completely true? Does the passing of generations bring with it religious deterioration, and is a later generation-by definition- spiritually inferior to previous generations? In some ways this is true but in many other ways it isn't.

Jewish faith and the transmission of Torah both emanate from one seminal event which occurred 3300 years ago. On that epic day G-d directly revealed Himself to over 3.5 million people; this once-in history event never recurred. Those who lived in closer proximity to that event, obviously, possessed a more accurate transmission of Torah than those who lived historically removed from "the source". Since those "closer to Sinai" possessed a more accurate Torah, they also possess greater halachik authority than later generations. In addition to their proximity to Sinai, those who lived through the ensuing 1300 years of prophecy enjoyed supernatural access to "Heavenly" information. The Torah knowledge gathered under these conditions certainly surpasses the level of Torah achievable in subsequent generations who struggle to recover the traditions of Sinai without the aid of prophecy. Certainly, our collective level of Torah knowledge cannot possibly match the achievements of generations upstream in Jewish history.

Generational decline also affects the caliber of Torah personalities. Torah greatness can't be achieved, it must be endowed. Exposure to great people is absolutely necessary for Torah excellence. Those who lived in earlier generations were exposed to more surpassing Torah personalities and were therefore, better able to achieve their own Torah eminence. As history progresses we suffer deterioration, both in our collective knowledge of Torah as well as in the quality of Torah scholars.

If earlier generations possessed greater Torah knowledge, we would expect their moral and religious behavior to be equally surpassing. Often this was true, but, sadly, human experience doesn't always match expectations. During first Temple era, our religious behavior was abysmal. Widespread violation of cardinal halachik prohibitions doomed the great potential of that period and sentenced our people to its first exile. We were far too confident in our land, our Temple and our belief that G-d would protect us from any and all calamities. Convinced of our invulnerability, we committed terrible sins. Our careless religious lifestyles wrecked our national potential and condemned the Temple.

Throughout our extended exile we also experienced periods of religious letdown. Unsurprisingly, the more Jews were persecuted the greater religious resolve we displayed; the more comfortable our surroundings and the greater the cultural embrace of Jews, the more our religious resolve atrophied. 15th century Spain and 19th century Eastern Europe provide two regrettable examples of religious regression prompted by excessive acculturation. Jews in Spain and Jews in Western Europe each became too comfortable in their respective cultures, and though each generation produced great Torah scholarship, they each experienced widespread religious regression. It is not always true that past generations exhibited greater religious commitment.

There is an additional area in which generations don't necessarily retreat. Regarding national faith and our response to historical adversity, later generations often surpass previous ones. Certain generations display uncommon courage in the face of excessive hostility. For example, the bravery of the Jews living under Roman persecution in the 1st and 2nd centuries was legendary. Known as the 'dor hashemad', their courage in defying the great Roman empire reinforced Jewish religion and pride, and paved the way for the emergence of the Talmud.

Our own generation has displayed similar national valor. Our generation has faced two daunting challenges unimaginable to previous generations. After the nightmare of the Holocaust, our people were tasked with rebuilding Jewish communities and reconstituting the Jewish spirit. Over the past 80 years we have heroically rebuilt the foundation of the Jewish world and restored a sense of Jewish communal belonging. Alongside the mission of recovering from the

Holocaust, we have also been challenged to rebuild and resettle our ancient homeland in the face of unrelenting opposition and constant invasions. Jews around the world have lobbied together to craft this historical miracle despite the hatred and violence directed against us.

The concept that generations deteriorate can be very misleading and worse, can become very enfeebling. This belief can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Convinced of our own helplessness, we become incapable of greater aspirations and too frail for great accomplishments. Jewish tradition is definitely built upon a hierarchy which acknowledges the authority of past generations. However, each generation faces its own "historical setup" and some generations display great heroism, courage and commitment in facing off against history. Our generation has much to be proud of.