

Never "Get Over It"

Moshe Taragin

"Let the stranger praise you, but not your own mouth". This proverb from Mishlei implies that often, outsiders, are better able to distill the virtues which we ourselves, take for granted. Ironically, it is oftentimes hateful and antisemitic slander which reminds us of the deeper qualities of Jewish identity.

A few weeks ago, Rudy Giuliani, the former mayor of New York City, ridiculed observance of Passover. Contemptuously, he mocked that "it [Pesach] happened over 3000 years ago..get over it".

Despite his malicious scorn, Rudy is absolutely right, and, of course, absolutely wrong. Yetziat Mitzrayim did occur over 3000 years ago, but we can't "get over it", nor for that matter, do we ever want to "get over it".

We call this inability to "get over it" by a different name. We call this distinctively Jewish trait "historical consciousness". We don't live in a historical vacuum but are tethered both to the past generations as well as to a long lineage of future people we will never meet. As Elie Weisel once observed "Jews are born old". Most of us can trace our *yichus* genealogy to four or five previous generations, despite the horrific interval of the Holocaust. Many of us carry names of ancestors we never met, but whose stories we retell and whose lives inspire our own. Beyond our genealogical familiarity, we are also coupled to our past through the great people whose works we study, whose ideas elevate us, and whose heroism shapes our lives.

Yomim tovim connect us with our glorious past. We celebrate the very same chagim which past generations observed, and in almost the same exact fashion. For us, chagim don't commemorate archaic events which happened "over 3000 years ago". For someone with historical consciousness, these epic events "happened" last year, and they "happened" fifty years ago to our parents, and they will keep on happening, every year, in the very same manner and on the exact same date.

Napoleon didn't laugh

Rudy Giuliani scoffed at our historical consciousness, but Napoleon stood in awe. Walking by a synagogue, he heard men wailing in a foreign language. Inquiring about the odd sounds, he was informed that on Tisha b'av Jews were grieving for their lost mikdash. In response to his inquiry as to how long ago this tragedy occurred, he was informed that the calamity causing all this ruckus occurred over 1800 years earlier. Fascinated with our collective memory he remarked "A nation that can mourn for so long the loss of its land and temple, will return one day to their land and see it rebuilt". Within 150 years, his prophecy partially materialized. Not too long after Napoleon's First Republic of France fell, we rebuilt our own history. It is likely that some of the descendants of those wailing French Jews who lay crumpled on the floor, currently walk with pride in the land of Israel.

I was recently asked which Jewish subject is most neglected in American Orthodox chinuch. As a Rabbi, I was probably expected to highlight an area of talmud torah study which is deficient, and whose study should be bolstered. I replied that the topic of Jewish history was insufficiently instructed in school curriculums. In the absence of any historical framing, mitzva observance can become lethargic and can, eventually, wilt under social and cultural pressures. A historical context lends backdrop, texture, and spirit to religious practice. Additionally, historical consciousness provides numerous building blocks for religious success.

Timeless Values

Culture, customs, and human conduct are always in flux, and, as social standards fluctuate, cardinal values tend to fade. Judaism enshrines fundamental and immutable values which are impervious to the ebb and flow of time. Our core values, divinely delivered and therefore unassailable, are all riveted to holidays, and our observance of these holidays reinforces the timelessness of these beliefs. Pesach underscores divine sovereignty, human liberty, and Jewish destiny. Shavuot confirms that an entire nation heard the directly revealed voice of Hashem, while embracing a life of commandment and covenant. Sukkot demonstrates both divine providence for individuals as well as divine authorship of history. On Rosh Hoshana we submit to divine justice while accepting moral accountability. Yom Kippur reminds a fallen person that Hashem is compassionate and offers teshuva and forgiveness. Historical holidays

reinforce core religious values, preventing their slow but gradual erosion. Historical consciousness reminds us that, despite the pressures of society, we possess eternal values, which remain immune to the ravages of time and culture.

Belonging

We are social animals, but sadly, we often sever ourselves from relationships and from community, sinking into the dark abyss of individualism and loneliness. As the modern world expands, we are becoming ever more lonely. We exchange information at breakneck speed, but we are quickly losing the art of communication, and when communication fails, we "unbelong" and sink into solitude. Historical consciousness connects us to a multi-generational community and redeems us from the loneliness of unbelonging. We live alongside generations of people of shared values and of common destiny.

Ironically, belonging to a historical community often strengthens affiliation with actual contemporary communities. Ideally, life in Israel is patterned upon this correlation between historical commitment and live communal experience. As we are all living through a common historical narrative, and one which we share with our past, we feel, or should feel, a deeper identification with one another. Belongingness is contagious.

We are not meant to live alone. Halachot such as kosher restrictions, minyan requirements and shemirat Shabbat all encourage clustered living. Historical awareness, and in particular, communal chagim reinforce these communal bonds which ritual establishes. Belonging to something larger than ourselves boosts happiness and well-being, while strengthening faith.

Mortality and Meaning

We are all haunted by our mortality. Everything we accomplish and everything we build in our limited time on earth will ultimately fade to dust. We all hear Shlomo Hamelech's gloomy voice whispering that man is futile, and his accomplishments are empty. What possible meaning can our limited lives possess? Without any meaning, life is empty, and we struggle for identity and for purpose.

In part, we transcend the limits of our mortality by incorporating our own lives into a larger historical partnership. We are partners in a larger historical project called Jewish history, and each brick we lay serves as the foundation for future brick layers. Together, with laborers of the past, we jointly craft Jewish history. The edifice may not be completed by the time we leave this earth, but our lives have acquired worth and purpose. As they catapult future generations to loftier heights, our accomplishments are never pointless. Historical consciousness responds to Shlomo's charge that all human achievement is vacant, by reassuring us that nothing is vacant when aligned with the arc of Jewish history.

Lives of Accountability

Living in history also makes us more accountable to history. It is easy to detect the ripple effects of past generations. We benefit from their successes just as we suffer from their malfunctions. The past 2000 years of galus have been an agonizing nightmare instigated by the religious collapse of previous generations. The past has carved out the present.

The future holds similar expectations for us. Historical accountability forces us to inspect our behavior and to make decisions based on long term factors. This is especially true in Israel where our decisions will affect all future generations of Jews. Modern culture encourages the deflection of personal responsibility, but historical consciousness mandates lives of accountability. Accountability forces us to behave with conscience, selflessness, and vision.

The secret of Jewish faith is that we never get over the past. We continue to create a past for the future.

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