

## **For you are a holy people to Hashem, your G-d. (14:2)**

*Rashi* explains that our personal *kedushah*, sanctity, is endowed to us by our forebears, our ancestors. In my opinion, herein lies one of the most inspiring principles of Judaism: we are descendants of a holy, illustrious lineage, and, as such, we have a responsibility to maintain this pedigree. This is perhaps one of the reasons that so many assimilated Jews have no impetus to return. They have no idea of their heritage, who they are, and from whom they have descended. The German reformers who initiated the break with traditional Judaism first erased Jewish history. They were acutely aware that, as long as we maintain a connection with the past, it would be difficult to sever one's relationship with Judaism. Torah became a legend. The Oral Law was the work of a group of overzealous, demanding rabbis; thus, it had no basis in Jewish law. Once that connection was broken, the rest was simple. Many of our ancestors were simple – for the most part not erudite – and economically-challenged people, who remained averse and diffident, living in the ghetto from birth to cradle. Without history, we can have no pride; without pride, we have no destiny.

We owe a debt of gratitude to our long history of forebears; as such, we have a responsibility to maintain their legacy. First and foremost, we owe it to ourselves and to them to study and research that legacy. Who were they? How did they live? How did they die? Why? Certainly, any serious-minded Jew or Jewess who possesses a modicum of intelligence will ask him or herself: So, why am I not following in their footsteps? Why am I not proud of my Jewish identity? After all, are not all of the preceding generations counting on me? Do I not owe them something?

These are timely questions which are sadly not asked much anymore. Today, the lines are drawn. One is either *frum*, observant, or not. Well, at least that is the way it used to be. Unfortunately, we are discovering more and more that some young people from observant homes have questions which they are not interested in sweeping under the rug. The outside world can today be accessed with the touch of a phone. They are regularly bombarded with enticing propaganda wherever they go. While the vast majority is sheltered from the various media – there are always the innocent few, the troubled, the one child that got away. We are often too busy to notice the change until it is too late. It begins subtly and, with time, becomes more dramatic. We wonder how it happened. Perhaps... just perhaps... maybe we never explained to them that they are part of something great, that they play a critical role in its continuity, and that they have in their hands the power to destroy the hopes and aspirations of thousands of their ancestors. Perhaps the following vignette might awaken someone. It is not new, but its timeless message is certainly worth repeating.

The story takes place in Kiev in 1960, but it must be a story that has often repeated itself, when elderly parents sit down with their children and share with them the regrets concerning the past and their hopes for the future – not their future, but that of their children. In this vignette, an elderly father took a quiet boat ride on the Dnieper River with his last surviving child – his daughter.

We have to remember that many of these parents, although not necessarily old, were nonetheless

aged in the sense that they had survived World War II in Russia, and had lived through much persecution and suffering. Many were not physically well and they were emotionally overwhelmed with anxiety concerning the future of their children – not the physical future, but their spiritual/Jewish future.

The father began, “You know, my dear daughter, I had five sons who did not survive the difficult war years. Sadly, I do not have anyone to recite *Kaddish* for me when my time comes to leave this world. Therefore, I want you to be my *Kaddish*, to sanctify your life, so that you will be a living tribute to sanctifying Hashem, thus perpetuating my name. I want you to understand that your concern should not be only for your personal self, but also for the memory of all those in your family who preceded you in life and who are no longer here. You are their hope.

“Now, I know that *Shabbos*, *kashrus*, etc. are *mitzvos* upon which I am certain you would never renege. Our heritage is too much a part of you. It is the basics, such as behaving with a demeanor becoming a member of the *am ha'nivchar*, chosen people, acting and living out your life with *kedushah*, sanctity, *tznius*, moral modesty, both in attire and comportment, that reflect your noble calling. Your dealings with your fellowman should bespeak a status whereby people will comment: ‘There goes Chaim Kohen’s daughter.’

“Our sages teach us a frightening lesson: If children leave the path of Torah forged for them by their parents, then their father’s merit cannot save them – regardless of their father’s virtue and piety. On the other hand, a child who is a *tzaddik*, righteous, can save a father and cause his *neshamah*, soul, to be taken out of *Gehinom*, Purgatory, even if the father was a *rasha*, evil-doer. Therefore, I ask for myself – and all those who have preceded me - that you perform the *mitzvos* with proper care, giving attention to maintaining yourself on an elevated level of propriety and ethical character, so that the labor of a lifetime will not go down the proverbial drain.

“What do I mean with the words ‘labor of a lifetime’?” The father pointed to a bridge that spanned the river. It was a large, solidly constructed bridge which served as the means for connecting two parts of the city, allowing for thousands of vehicles to cross it daily. “Do you see that bridge?” he asked. “Hundreds of people worked to construct that bridge. It took a few years of great effort exerted by many in order to provide us with this wonderful bridge. At the end of the job, the contractor presented the government with his bill. Our government is very astute. It will not pay for a commissioned job until it has been tested out. They must confirm that everything was executed in accordance with the plan and blueprint. Is the bridge strong? Will it last for many years? They test the bridge to see if it is able to bear the enormous weight of all the traffic that will traverse it daily. To this end, they bring a train pulling forty cars loaded with coal and run them across the bridge. If it withstands the test and all forty cars are able to make it across, - it is a success. If not...

“This test is not only for money, for failure means there is no payment. It is also about pride and reputation. For some, failure can spell disaster. It took years developing their skill and reputation and, in the span of a few minutes, all could be all lost.

“And the test begins. One by one, the cars slowly make it onto the bridge. As each car rolls onto the bridge, the weight on it increases, and the suspense builds. Thirty cars have crossed – thirty one – two – three... finally the last car – number forty is slowly grinding its way up to the bridge. Knuckles are white, breathing is slowed almost to a halt; this is the moment that matters most. Will they leave successful, or will they leave with their heads bowed in defeat? The car reaches the middle of the bridge, and the bridge begins to tremble. Suddenly, with a loud crashing noise, the bridge crumbles under the weight, causing all forty cars to plunge into the river below. All of the toil exerted by the engineers, the technicians, the various laborers – all for naught. Instead of being crowned with laurels, they return home in shame and dejection.

“It is very much the same with the bridge that spans the generations, the chain that stretches back to *Sinai* and reaches all the way back to Avraham *Avinu*. Every one of our fathers, our ancestors, traversed that bridge of life. They passed the ultimate test by clinging to their beliefs and maintaining their convictions. I, too, will not live forever, and one day I will go the way of all men. I will have lived my life with conviction and observed Hashem’s Torah and *mitzvos*, despite the many challenges which I confronted. We – they and I - look to you to remain strong, to overcome the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, that is constantly presenting obstacles in our way. Remember, an error on your part affects not only your life, but the legacies, hopes and aspirations of all of us who preceded you. You are that last car that can make the difference between success and eternal failure.”

The message is quite simple: It is not always about us. Each and every one of us carries an enormous responsibility upon his/her shoulders. The decisions and choices we make do not affect only our lives, but have ramifications throughout time. We owe it to the many generations of our forebears who rely upon us.