

In order to prolong your days and the days of your children upon the land that Hashem has sworn to your forefathers. (11:21)

I just came across a homily published in 1929 by *Horav Elazar Meir Preill, zl, Rav* of Elizabeth, New Jersey, in which he decries the lack of respect for the “older” generation. There used to be a time (he writes) when the older generation were the pillars of the Jewish community, their advice sought, appreciated and accepted. “Here” (in America at that time), the younger generation has taken charge – relegating their forebears to a place of honor in a nursing home or to a corner of their homes. Not only is their opinion not sought, it is not accepted. They are “has beens” who have little to no value with regard to the furtherance of their respective communities. This was ninety years ago. The reason for the change of communal leadership between Europe and America, explains *Rav Preill*, is that the values had changed. What was important and valued in Europe no longer carries weight in America. Here an alternative set of values reigns.

In a society in which people prioritize spiritual values in their life and *weltenshaung*-- as was the case concerning the members of the previous generation who had “been there and done that,” who had life experience and were closely connected to the spiritual leadership of the past -- the people turn to their elders for advice and counsel. When life, however, is all about material advancement, fulfilling our physical passions and living up to the standards of a hedonistic, narcissistic society whose barometer of culture is the ancient Greeks – well, obviously we are not interested in a course of history and ethics. We are not concerned with hearing “no!” – we want to hear “yes!” – that is when we even bother asking.

Rav Preill quotes a fascinating *Chazal*, which he uses as a foundation for addressing the Jew in relationship with society, but very applicable (with a dose of this author’s license) to contemporary times. The *Talmud Berachos* 8A quotes Rabbi Yochanan (who himself was blessed with outstanding longevity) wondering how there could be old people in Bavel, Babylonia, considering that the blessing of longevity (according to our opening *pasuk*) is reserved for residents of *Eretz Yisrael*. The response was, “There are people who arise early to attend synagogue in the morning and stay late in the synagogue in the evening.” In other words, *shul* attendance (obviously followed by real *davening*) can make the difference in one’s lifespan.

The *bais haknesses* has always been the centerpiece of our *Yahadus*, Judaism. It has been our spiritual home: the place where we go to pray, to learn; the place for spiritual resuscitation and revival. It is there that we pour out our hearts in supplication to Hashem. The *shul* has been the font from which our souls imbibed their spiritual sustenance, thus allowing us to maintain the proper values and outlook. When the fortress of protection is breached from within -- or worse, when the people who require its stability and preservation do not remain inside, or they simply do not show up -- they lose the insurance that it provides.

There used to be a time when the *shul* was truly the centerpiece of Judaism in a community. (Please consider that *Rav* Preill wrote this in 1929, and America did not have much established to speak of at that time. Thus, he must have been referring to Europe, whose culture was dominantly Torah oriented.) Sadly, in the present (so he writes), the *shul* has been supplanted by the lodge, the country club, the board room. People no longer have the time or the inclination to spend their days, beginning with early morning and ending in the evening, in the *shul*. Understandably, one must leave to earn a living, but, as long as his primary focus is Torah and *tefillah*, he is safe.

The *shul* changed, as it became more and more the place where people gather to socialize, *shmuess*, do business, decide the future of the world – everything but *daven* and learn. The older generation became extinct, and the young and more powerful-- with their material successes to bolster their strength -- took over, making decisions based upon a new set of values. This, explains *Rav* Preill, does not lend itself to *arichas yamim*, spiritual and physical longevity.

Now, let us fast forward ninety years and consider the state of our *shuls* today. We are leagues ahead of the past in our Torah knowledge, but is *davening* with a *minyan*, on time, remaining in the sanctuary for the duration of the service, a priority? Do we make a point to come to *shul* a few minutes early to recite *Tehillim* or to learn as our fathers did, or do we come on time for *Borchu*, put on *Tallis* and *Tefillin*, and leave prior to the last *Kaddish*? *Davening* used to be a daily staple, our singular opportunity to speak with Hashem. Although we certainly *daven*, it does not have the same critical importance. Do the *shul* and *tefillah b'tzibur* play a vital role in our lives, or do we attend only when we have time, settling instead to *daven* wherever and whenever? The sanctity of the synagogue is contingent upon the sanctity of our prayers. They go hand in hand. If our *tefillos* take a distant second place to everything else, what can we say for the edifice that is supposedly dedicated to prayer?