

## Ask your father and he will relate it to you, and your elders and they will tell you. (32:7)

Issues arise; questions abound; to whom do we turn for sage advice, intelligent counsel? The Torah enjoins us to turn to “your father,” whom *Rashi* interprets as the *Navi*, prophet, Torah leader of the generation, and “your elders,” who are the *chachamim*, Torah scholars. After a lifetime of Torah study and devotion, these Torah scholars have honed their minds through the *daas*, wisdom, of the Torah which they have cultivated. *Horav Avraham Yaakov Teitelbaum, zl*, quotes a novel homiletic exposition of this *pasuk* rendered by his *Rebbe*, the venerable *Horav Meir Arik, zl*, which is practical and timeless in its applicability to every generation. A *manhig Yisrael*, Torah leader who shepherds Hashem’s people, is compared to a father. He is responsible for their spiritual inculcation and adherence to the Torah and *mitzvos*. Elisha referred to his *Rebbe*, *Eliyahu HaNavi*, as *Avi, avi rechev Yisrael*, “My father! My father! *Yisrael’s* chariot and horsemen!” (*Melachim II* 2:12). Thus, when confronted with a serious question which requires spiritual guidance, we turn to our “fathers,” the Torah giants.

One criterion that determines their qualification to answer. *Zekeinecha v’yomru lach*, when you seek their counsel, if the response is: “This is how your grandfather acted; this is how we as Jews have acted in the past” – then listen to his advice. He is a *manhig* that is connected to a previous generation. He respects his predecessors and seeks to emulate them. If he says, however, “My grandfather acted in this manner; I, however, have a different opinion. Times have changed, and what was good for my grandfather does not necessarily apply to me,” if he distances himself from the past, he is not someone whom we should consult for advice.

*bechirah chafshis*, freedom of choice/will. We choose – Hashem acts. The goal of Creation is the fusion of G-d and man, the idea that man choose correctly, thus eliciting Hashem’s positive response. History examines the world and how its events have affected the union between man and G-d. Torah, which is the core of our belief, is also our historical primer, which guides and inspires us concerning how to choose, how to live.

Memories are critical to us. Indeed, they are our only legacy, and, thus, our only bequest. Judaism preserves and incorporates them into our present lives, seeing to it that they are the foundation of what we transmit to – and build upon – for the future. Judaism is a rendezvous between what we have taken from the past and what we bequeath to the future. We believe because we remember. Those who were there, who experienced, transmitted what they saw and experienced to the next generation. This is our sense of history. The secular streams sought to have us break with the past. When we have no memories, we can have no faith.

*Zachor*, remember, *yetzias Mitzrayim*, our exodus from Egypt. We remember by reliving it the way our parents and their parents did before them, all the way back to the Exodus. We believe, because we remember; we remember, because we live it. Our *Yomim Tovim*, Festivals, are not

merely perpetuations of what once was, but rather opportunities for us to foster an identity with what we are remembering. Thus, when we sit in the *sukkah*, we sense that we are in the *Midbar*, Wilderness. This is how a Jew lives.

*Z'chor yemos olam*, "Remember the days of yore" (*Devarim* 32:7): How does one do this? *U'lemaan tesaper b'aznei bincha u'ben bincha eis ashe Hisalalti b'Mitzrayim*; "And so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son's son that I made a mockery of Egypt" (*Shemos* 10:2). We remember by relating our memories from generation to generation. *Zachor*, remember, is active memory. *Zikaron* is passive remembrance. We believe in active, living memory, because, in this manner, the experience remains alive within us, imbuing us with *emunah*, faith, in the Almighty. By making the events of the past an active part of the present, they no longer remain simply a "memory." They become our experience.

Everything that we do is focused on building for the future. We have no idea how much impact our endeavors in the present can have on the future. *Horav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, zl (Lifrakim)*, applies this concept to a statement of *Chazal (Berachos 4b)*, *Eizehu ben Olam Habba, zeh ha'someich geulah l'tefillah*, "Who is assured of a place in the World to Come? It is one who juxtaposes redemption (recited after *Shema*) into the evening (*Shemoneh Esrai*) prayer." A number of commentaries have been written to this *Chazal*. *Rabbeinu Yonah* explains that one who engages in prayer immediately after mentioning the redemption indicates his recognition of the fact that the purpose of the redemption – and, by extension, all of the kindnesses that Hashem bestows upon us – is to enable us to serve Him. A person who has internalized this verity is certainly worthy of *Olam Habba*.

*Rav Weinberg* explains *geulah*, redemption, and *tefillah* in terms of their metaphorical symbolism. *Geulah* alludes to remembering the past, the redemption which Hashem wrought for us. *Tefillah* connotes the future, our aspirations, longings and objectives for the Final Redemption, when we will return to our home in Yerushalayim to serve the Almighty in the newly-rebuilt *Bais Hamikdash*. These hopes and ambitions, personal and collective, are expressed in the various blessings we recite in the *Shemoneh Esrai*. We acknowledge that our future is a worthwhile reality only if it is concretized and anchored in the bedrock of the past. Otherwise, our prayer is a *tefillah yesomah*, orphaned prayer, without roots or stability. Those who reject the past, who only think about tomorrow – and want nothing at all to do with yesterday – lack this bulwark which offers foundation and provides security. They have no model, no exemplar to emulate, no one from whom to learn. They have no blueprint on which to pattern the future. They lack the basic understanding of the meaning of *geulah*. A redemption is not for the purpose of physical advancement. Redemption precursus the opportunity for the Jew to live as a free Jew in order to better serve Hashem. Unless one acknowledges this, he is not free; his redemption is left lacking.

As mentioned, one never knows what he can learn from the past, from individuals who are gone, whom he never knew. In some instances, a message is conveyed under extraordinary circumstances, unanticipated by the receiver and unintended by the sender. The following vignette

provides a timely message (quoted in “Stories that Warm the Heart”, Rabbi Binyomin Pruzansky). A teenager went to Poland for his high school graduation trip, in which the students visited, among the surviving spiritual and physical edifices that bustled in Pre-World War II Europe, the dreaded Auschwitz concentration camp. While the market places and synagogues which were once filled with Jews produced a feeling of nostalgia concerning a bygone era, Auschwitz evoked feelings of dread, fear and animus. He had heard tales of the Holocaust from his grandparents, but, until he passed beneath the infamous gates with the deliberately cruel sign, “*Arbeit macht frei*, Labor makes you free,” he did not feel the perverse irony of this sham entrance into one of the most heinous structures in history, a place synonymous with brutal torture, degradation and death.

Suddenly, all of the stories of the Holocaust took on a new reality, a profound meaning to which – upon seeing the buildings, their function and what they represented to him as a Jew – he could now relate. He thought about his brothers and sisters, torn from their homes, housed like animals for days in cattle cars, and then, those few who managed to survive the ordeal, arrived at this “campground” – *Arbeit macht frei*, to discover that survival for many led up to pain, depravation and brutal death.

He moved on to the gas chambers, the infamous room which was the last place many Jews entered alive. It was end of their line. He imagined them suffering through the throes of death, begging for another chance, an opportunity to live, raise a family, the promises they must have mouthed, pleading just to live. Sadly, for so many the answer was, “No”. They were destined to die *Al Kiddush Hashem*, to glorify the Almighty, to live again in a better world. All of this coursed through his mind when he saw “it,” the handprint on the wall.

At first it was not noticeable. Time does that. It was undoubtedly the remnants of the fingerprints of a human hand. It did not take a powerful imagination to conjure up the penetrating meaning of the handprint. This room was the holding room where the prisoners waited before going into the next room, the dreaded gas chamber. This room represented the final moments before the final abyss – death. This was the room where they prayed their last, where they offered their final heartfelt plea, begging, promising – anything – just as long as they could live a little bit longer. This room represented the significance of life, and the handprint pressed into the wall reflected how hard someone had fought to live!

It was at that moment that a happy, go lucky, no-care-in-the-world teenager confronted the reality of life. He had his whole life ahead of him. He was standing in a room in which the fragility of life could not be understated. He was having a grand time on a school trip, when he stopped to think about another Jew who, fifty years earlier, had been dragged to his death, a Jew who wanted so much to live that he pressed his hand firmly against the wall – so hard that, a half century later, one could see the imprint! He was brought to realize the relevance of each moment of life, how precious it was and how dear it should be. At that moment, he vowed to alter his life’s trajectory. From then on, he would utilize every G-d-given moment in the most meaningful manner.

Great story, but it is the addendum, *Horav* Shimon Pincus' comment, that is the game changer: "The man who grasped at that wall did more than gain a few more seconds of life – he changed another person's life completely, fifty years later! He accomplished more than he could have dreamed. It only goes to show that every moment of life is truly priceless."

Connecting with the past can change our future. One never realizes what "seizing the moment" can do for him in the present and others in the future.