

Parashat Toldot, 5774 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

I felt bathed in light, my soul lifted up on the song of so many voices filling the packed shtibl. It was "Souly Shabbos" at the close of the week that the Pew survey on American Jews came out. Consternation and doom came quickly to define the mood of official pronouncements and predictions. I felt bemused as I looked around the room, mostly young people, but yet a spectrum, vibrant in celebration of Shabbos, of Yiddishkeit, of life, of each other. I acknowledge that as in regard to many matters of importance to us, we live in somewhat of a bubble here in Boston and in Jamaica Plain. I also acknowledge that serious concerns are raised through the Pew survey regarding the continuity of Jewish life in America. At the same time, surrounded by a drumbeat of pulsating affirmation for Jewish life, I was filled with hope.

I am thinking again of the Pew survey during this week of *Parashat Toldot*. *Toldot* means "generations." The interweaving of "generations," of where and from whom we come and to where we go and of who shall follow is a thread that unfolds throughout the Torah portion. In the very first verse of *Toldot*, there is a lack of clarity, which generation is in the foreground and which is in the background? A shimmering in time brings its own clarity, generations are entwined, one unfolding from the other, yet turning back to draw from earlier wisdom, turning ahead to offer its own path, leaving blazes that fade into unmarked trails ahead.

I was writing a short piece for an "Ask the Rabbi" column this week, addressing a question as to how interfaith couples and families might respond to the Pew survey and participate in the ensuing conversation. Though addressing interfaith families, I realized as I wrote that I was addressing so many of us, all of us who have ever felt different, as though we didn't belong, marginalized or excluded from the Jewish community. It is certainly something I have felt personally and continue to feel, whether in regard to politics or the nature of Jewish community and its organizational structure. I also acknowledge that at times I have caused others to feel excluded, and I cry for the tensions even as I continue to wrestle with them. I share some of what I have written as thoughts in formation. Addressed to interfaith families, it is really for all of us, each to hear and respond through our own experience, from our own place of exclusion, seeking, and yearning.

Distilled to its essence, concern for the Pew survey data has to do with the continued unfolding of the generations of the Jewish people and of Jewish life. All who wish to be part of that journey from past to future as it wends through

the present should be welcome, each one to play a vital part through the unique nature of their own gifts. In the pain and puzzlement of your question, I sense a deeper question, the answer to which is, "yes, you do belong and you have a place." The concern with intermarriage is precisely that the generations of the Jewish people will not continue. Interfaith couples and families are in a unique position to help shape both the discussion and the journey through their presence. Offered with understanding and pride, the most powerful response to preachers of doom is to say, "We too are part of the Jewish future and will help to make it happen."

Once you have taken your place and found a community with whom to travel, the discussion needs to move quickly beyond the call of survival and continuity, though itself a sacred task. The question then is how best to acquire the inheritance that is your due, the gifts of Jewish life that are yours, the fruits and flowers with which to adorn your home and delight the souls of all within. There are enough fellow seekers, enough communities, enough teachers and rabbis of open heart and mind who will embrace you, but you need to enter and say "we are here." I would hope that out of the Pew survey all of our Jewish religious movements might learn to draw without fear on each other's strengths and help all who come to us to find the right place for them. However familiar or foreign the song of Jewish life, learn to sing it together, shaping the words and the melody in your own key, your love enriched in Shabbos embrace, the mystery of the *aleph-bet* upon your children's lips. Finding meaning in the moment, you affirm the future.

Affirming the future of the Jewish people becomes one with affirming the future of the world and all people. One of the most critical tensions to me is that between the universal and the particular. It is a tension that needs always to be finely tuned. A vibrant and harmonious world needs the song of many peoples, their ways and their wisdom. Weaving together the wisdom of our own past with the wisdom emerging in our time, we create a vibrant Jewish people whose song shall enrich the human chorus. Committed to our own survival as a people, we go out into the world as Jews, affirming and reaching out to help insure the survival of all people and peoples, and the world itself.

In the story of Isaac and the wells in *Parashat Toldot*, it is about both, the unfolding of generations and the making of peace. Refusing to fight over resources, showing through strength of character and perseverance that there is water enough for all, Isaac opens up the wells his father had dug, which were later blocked up by the Philistines. Removing layers of debris until living waters flowed again, Isaac named the wells by the same names his father had given them. He then went on and dug new wells and gave them names of his own

choosing, names from out of his own experience that carried the hope he nurtured for the future.

As we draw from the wellsprings of our past and dig new wells in the present, their waters shall flow together toward the future. In response to cynicism and despair, may our way affirm the beauty of Rav Kook's teaching and make us worthy of its challenge, "The old shall be renewed, and the new shall be made holy."

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor