

Parashat Ekev: Remember, Keep and Teach, Reflections on the state of American Jewry

By Rachel Raz, Temple Emunah 2018

Shabbat Shalom!

This week's Haftarah from Isaiah chapter 49 opens with the words:

יד ותאמר ציון, עזבני יהוה; ואדני,
שכחני. 14 and Zion said: 'The LORD left me, and
the Lord forgotten me.'

Reading this text, and looking at American Jewry today, I wondered if in our generation God left Zion or did Zion left God? In other words, did American Jewry leave the way of God, Jewish values, our story and mission?

Earlier this year, my daughter Daphna led a birthright trip from New York to Israel. For those of you who don't know what Birthright is, it is a free 10 day educational trip to Israel for young adults between the ages of 18 (now) to 32. The program started in 1999 and so far over 650,000 young adults from 67 countries have participated in it. The goals are to strengthen the participants' Jewish identity, connect them to Israel and Israelis and to the Jewish world. When my daughter returned, on our way back from the airport I asked her some questions about her experience.

I asked, "What surprised you?"

She thought for a minute and answered that when she explained to the group the plans for *shabbat*, one of the participants asked, "What is *shabbat*?" and she realized that some of the participants have never experienced *shabbat* in their lives and had never even heard about it. Of course this realization led her to ask herself what other things they might not be familiar with.

This experience led to conversations about the participants' upbringing and Jewish experiences. The majority of participants came from interfaith families. Some had no

Jewish experiences and weak to no Jewish identity; some families chose to avoid any religious traditions to make the marriage work for them. Those participants felt that they were missing out on something, missing some roots and connections. Some came from families that chose to raise their kids *Jewishly* but very often felt that the extended family didn't like this approach, and even saw it as a betrayal of their own upbringing and traditions. Many of the participants felt that for the first time, on this Birthright trip, they met people who are similar to them, people of their age who felt the same; confused, conflicted without a sense of belonging. For the first time through this experience they felt they belonged to part of a group!

I then asked her if she experienced any powerful moments, and she immediately said, "Yes." One night at the southern part of Israel they stayed at a Bedouin tent. For their surprise, three other Birthright groups were at the tent, coming from Belarus, Ukraine and Argentina. There was a magical feeling at that moment; they felt that they were part of something bigger, part of a large family, part of a people. Again, this is something that many hadn't experienced before.

So, there is no doubt that Birthright is a very successful program. In Hebrew it is called *Taglit*, discovery. The participants - for sure - discover many things about themselves, their roots, people and traditions.

The big question that came to my mind was: why is it that only at the age of 18, 22 or 26, these participants, for the first time in their lives, experienced Shabbat, Israel, a sense of belonging to a family and the Jewish people? What happened until then? Why didn't they experience it at the age of 3,5,10? How did we get to the point that a program like Birthright is so needed?

These questions bring us to this week's Torah portion.

In Parashat Ekev, Deuteronomy, chapter eight (Page 1041 of the Etz Hayim) Moses addresses and advise the people of Israel. He gives them (and us) a list of "To do" and "not to do" with explanations of what will happen if they (we) won't follow this advice.

יא 11 Beware lest thou forget the LORD thy God, in not
keeping His commandments, and His ordinances,
and His statutes, which I command thee this day;
היום.

יב 12 lest when thou hast eaten and art satisfied, and
hast built goodly houses, and dwelt therein;

יג 13 and when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and
thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou
hast is multiplied;

יד 14 **then thy heart be lifted up**, and thou forget the
LORD thy God, who brought thee forth out of the
land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage;

17 and thou say in thy heart: 'My power and the
might of my hand hath gotten me this wealth.'

18 But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God, for it
is He that giveth thee power to get wealth, that He
may establish His covenant which He swore unto thy
fathers, as it is this day. {P}

19 And it shall be, if thou shalt forget the LORD thy
God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and
worship them, I forewarn you this day that ye shall
surely perish.

כ 20 As the nations that the LORD maketh to perish
before you, so shall ye perish; because ye would not
hearken unto the voice of the LORD your God. {P}

If we go back to the Birthright group, which is a good example of the new generation of Jews in the USA, we can see that these participants didn't forget God, or the Jewish story, values and people; rather they never had the opportunities to experience them and learn about them!

How did we get to this point where we have generations who don't know God, and the way of God? Generations who don't feel connected? How did we get here? Who is responsible and what can we do to change it?

We can find some answers in the Parasha: Chapter 11, verse 19 (page 1053)

יח וְשַׂמְתֶּם אֶת-דְּבָרַי אֵלֶּה, עַל-לִבְבְּכֶם וְעַל-
נַפְשְׁכֶם; וְקָשַׁרְתֶּם אֹתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יְדְּכֶם, וְהָיוּ
לְטוֹטְפוֹת בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם. **18** Therefore shall ye lay up these My words in
your heart and in your soul; and ye shall bind
them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall
be for frontlets between your eyes.

יט וְלַמְדֹתֶם אֹתָם אֶת-בְּנֵיכֶם, לְדַבֵּר בָּם, בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ
בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלַקְחֶךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ, וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ. **19** And ye shall teach them your children,
talking of them, when thou sittest in thy
house, and when thou walkest by the way,
and when thou liest down, and when thou
risest up.

כ וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל-מְזוּזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ, וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ. **20** And thou shalt write them upon the door-
posts of thy house, and upon thy gates;

“And ye shall teach them your children”

Whose responsibility is it to teach the children? And who is teaching our children today?

I am sorry to report about the gloomy reality when answering those questions. Education of our children is an area that for several generations hasn't gotten the right attention and resources. I will even say it boldly, that Jewish education of our children was (and still is in many parts of the country) suffers from neglect by the Jewish community on a national level. For several decades we did not invest enough in education and educators. It starts from preschools, supplementary school and day schools. We experience a severe shortage of qualified Jewish educators. This profession is not valued in our communities, salaries are low and in many cases with no benefits. We don't encourage our children to become Jewish educators. We don't invest in educators' professional growth, we don't develop and use new curricula that can inspire new generations.

Moreover, the Jewish world has changed, partially due to a decline over the years in good Jewish experiences and education; with 60% interfaith families, two working parents, in many cases, living away from extended families and under lots of pressure. In addition, the liberal world has also experienced a decline in religious practices and affiliations, a decline in communities and connectivity. Yes, we do live in an era of technological advancements that connect us more than ever but at the same time many feel lonely and disconnected more than ever before.

In general, our families, educators and communities are not ready to address those changes. So, what can we do?

On the personal level:

יט וְלַמְדֹתֶם אֹתָם אֶת-בְּנֵיכֶם, לְדַבֵּר בָּם, בְּשֹׁבְתְךָ
בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ, וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ.

19 And ye shall teach them your children, talking of them, when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

Invest in your Jewish education, your children and grandchildren. If you don't have any, get involved in the community.

On a larger scale, we can use everyone's help....

Some communities, federations and foundation are noticing this issue and are investing more in educators today. In 2016, Hillel International started HillelU, designed to educate all Hillel professionals as educators. The Foundation of Jewish Camp is investing in the training of camp counselors. Communities like Denver (Rose Foundation), Bay Area (Jim Joseph Foundation), Chicago (Crown), Washington DC (Federation), NY (Jewish Education Project) are putting lots of resources into education. Israel is training Schlichim and send them around the world to infuse the Jewish communities with Jewish knowledge and experiences. At Hebrew College, we work to advance Jewish education and investment in educators, clergy, cantors and the community. We also advocate for educators and investment in education. In 2015, I founded the national Jewish Early Engagement Forum (JEEF). The forum serves as a platform where we share the reality of Jewish education with the larger community and strategies to advance the field. I am currently working with Haifa University and the Haifa Municipality on an international conference that will focus on investment in education and educators. I am happy to report that more organizations and communities are starting to notice and invest in education and educators, but it is not enough. We need an investment on a larger scale.

יט וְלַמְדֹתֵם אֹתָם אֶת-בְּנֵיכֶם, לְדַבֵּר בָּם, בְּשֹׁבֶתְךָ
בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ, וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ.
19 And ye shall teach them your children,
talking of them, when thou sittest in thy house,
and when thou walkest by the way, and when
thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

If you would like to explore ways to become involved, please reach out to me and together we can work to ensure that future generations will be connected to Jewish life, wisdom and tradition from the start.

Shabbat Shalom,

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