

Abraham and Sarah Are Models of Faith

In ages past, our models of faith have been the patriarchs, especially Abraham, the man of perfect faith willing to sacrifice his son at God's command. For those of us with an unsure faith, our model should be the matriarchs — especially Sarah. Sarah is skeptical; she laughs at God's promise of a child in old age. Indeed, Sarah laughs even at the moment of that child's birth and names him accordingly *Yitzhak* (what better metaphor for the history of the Jewish people in this century). Sarah, unlike Abraham never hears the word of God directly, but can only guess at His desire. Yet, despite all the disappointments of her life, she still has faith in herself and in God.

How can we live with such unsurety? How shall we act? Let us return for a last time to Genesis: God, regretting having driven us from the garden, gave us the Torah which in itself is an *Etz Hayyim* — a tree of eternal life. Driven from the garden, humans can taste of eternity only through the taste of the Torah. Yet, there are those in our time who believe this tree should be discarded, or simply ignored. Others believe that by trimming only a few dead branches, the tree will be set right again. Others who try to keep the tree protected by keeping it fenced in on all sides because they believe that in that fashion they will be able to keep out all the diseases of the world. In fact, though, they stunt the growth of the tree and thus kill it in the most painful way possible.

Torah Must Grow To Stay Alive

All of these misunderstand the imagery of the tree of life that is the Torah. A tree is a constantly growing organism which, if it is to remain healthy, needs to be pruned not only of its dead branches but pruned of its live ends too so that it can grow all the more luxuriantly. The tree *must* grow and this *must* change or it will die.

To what can this living sense of tradition be compared? Seder Eliyahu Zuta tells the following parable: Once there was a king who loved two servants. To each he gave a measure of wheat and flax. The wise servant took the flax and spun it into a cloth. He took the wheat and made a loaf of bread which he covered with the cloth. The silly servant did nothing. When the king returned he praised the wise servant and scorned the silly one. So, too, when God gave the Torah to Israel, He gave it as wheat from which flour should be extracted, as flax from which clothing should be made.

Link the Past to the Present

Our Torah must reflect our lives and concerns. It must be transformed by our experience as well as maintaining a connection with the past. That is why it is Elijah who will come to answer all unresolved halakhic questions in the end of days. Why not Moses? asks Levi of Berditchev. He answers that it is Elijah who has never died and is aware of all that has transpired in the world — all the changes that have occurred. Most of all, he is aware of the present and so it is Elijah who can understand *this* generation's Torah.

Like the rabbis before us, we must change the tradition radically and yet maintain our ties to tradition. Only in this way will the tree of life flourish again. And only then will we see the fulfillment of the verse recited every *Shabbat* upon returning the Torah to the ark: "It (the Torah) is a tree of life to those who grasp it and happy are those who uphold it. Its paths are paths of pleasantness and all its ways partake of the completeness of *Shalom*."

A conference center afterword

Jeff Heilpern and David Teutsch

In a time of serious organizational fragmentation, moral confusion, and personal search, new alliances that create real change and growth in the Jewish world are rare but not impossible. The success of the First National Havurah Conference testifies to such possibilities. Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, unaffiliated, and independent Jews came together with tremendous energy and a much greater commonality than most believed existed. The emergence of this new commonality goes further than just movements. It brings together the counter-culture and the mainstream as well as groups across generational lines. The search for community and for meaningful individual expressions of Jewishness, including an exploration of the tradition, united the group.

This search for tradition and community are but part of the struggle for meaningful Jewish identity and involvement in our time. That struggle will lead to a variety of new forms and expressions that can revitalize many already existing institutions if those institutions are flexible enough to keep a pace with the rapid changes of our time.

A Catalyst For Change

In our rapidly changing world, breakdown and loss co-exist with opportunities for tremendous growth. It is the position of the National Jewish Conference Center that many such new alliances will be emerging within the next few years. Acting as a catalyst in helping new groups to form and in supporting innovative projects in already established groups, the Conference Center is rapidly becoming a focal point for positive change. The need for new forms of outreach exists because the current generation of Jews, while more American than prior generations, feels less certain about how to participate in Jewish life.

New ways must be devised for our post-Holocaust, technocratic world to help individuals discover the excitement, meaning and richness of the tradition; and to develop new structures for community. The havurah movement is one such mechanism. We look forward to continuing to support the havurah movement and to aiding other innovative projects that will strengthen Jewish life.

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