

Mishpatim: Generations

- Berel Wein.

Two events that ripped apart the fabric of Jewish continuity; Marxism, and the Holocaust. What are the consequences, and what is the task before us if we would heal the rifts they created?

Generations

Rabbi Berel Wein

The continuing and necessary stress on continuity in Jewish life is based upon the realization that only through continuity in the family structure can continuity be achieved in the national structure as well. The past one hundred-fifty years of Jewish life recorded two episodes that broke this chain of continuity that had survived so many attempts to destroy it over the ages. The first was the revolutionary spirit of Marxism, secularism and nationalism that swept the street of the Jewish young in Europe and other places as well at the end of the nineteenth century. This spirit was so strong and so widespread that it undermined almost all Jewish family structure and pitted the younger generation in angry confrontation against the older generation. The old had to be discarded in order to make room for the new. This new spirit of Jewish activism and utopianism caused an abandonment of Jewish practice and a substitution of foreign values for traditional Jewish thought and attitudes. The rip in the fabric of Jewish continuity occasioned by this revolutionary spirit, a spirit that tragically has proven to be unrealistic and destructive in practice, has great ramifications in Israeli society today. To a great extent, the religious and secular societies here in Israel have little interaction one with another. They are like darkened ships that pass each other in the night. This augurs little comfort for our continuity as a united people and a strong society. The “new” generations have lost connection to their ancestral heritage and their past generations.

The second calamity that befell the Jewish world that destroyed our chain of continuity is the Holocaust and its resultant trauma on Jewish society. Aside from the fact that two entire generations were destroyed, thus leaving millions of Jews with no grandparents or immediate past generations to relate to, the Holocaust guaranteed that our attempt to restore our past would be in the main unsuccessful.

The Orthodox world has created a fantasy past of Eastern Europe, a world that did not exist in the 1930's. In creating this fantasy world of unanimous sweetness, unity and piety, we have made it impossible to really reconnect to our past generations since they never existed in the manner that our fantasizers now portray them as having been. Current Jewish housing developments carry names of Polish and Lithuanian villages whose Jewish populations were destroyed, many times by their very neighbors in those villages. To me this has always been an eerie and incorrect way of recalling the past. The Jewish world abounds in stories, fables, and legends about the past generations, most of which are fanciful and not accurate. Much of what is therefore askew in current Jewish religious society is a product of this lack of true continuity between generations. It is difficult to accurately recreate the past, especially if we wish to make it fit into currently acceptable political and social norms. Creating a false and make-believe past eventually is detrimental to a healthy and strong generational future.

The Holocaust has also wreaked havoc in the generational inheritance of the secular Jewish society. There remained no one to stand up and admit the mistakes of the past revolutionary generations. There was no grandfather around to tell a grandchild that Marx had bankrupted as an ideologue long before the Soviet Union actually collapsed. And the secular Jewish culture and social heritage of Eastern European Jewry, which almost in spite of itself was automatically suffused with Jewish values and the spirit of Jewish tradition, had almost no surviving teachers or role models for the new Israeli generation. That generation therefore substituted Western culture with all of its attractive surface richness and its deep-seated problems for Jewish culture. The results of this substitution of values and culture are plain for all to see in today's Israeli society.

In the Sephardic world, the upheaval of forced immigration and the breakdown of generational authority caused by that society's forced secularization in Israel, also destroyed the bonds of family generations. It however suffered in this fashion to a lesser degree than its Ashkenazic brethren. Nevertheless, it was unable to reveal to the larger Israeli society its long experience with the true face of Islam and of the existential struggle that it is now clear that we face here. This breakdown of generational communication has proven to be quite harmful to us. It is always more painful to have to learn bitter lessons from scratch instead of from guidance and instruction. Yet, that is exactly what we will have to do. We will have to rebuild the generational chain of Jewish society even if it must begin now only with ourselves. Only generations that interface with each other can create meaningful Jewish continuity.

Shabat shalom.