

SERMON PESACH YZKOR 08

**"And you shall tell it to your children"**

**Rabbi Claudio J. Kogan**

Pesach is an event and a festival that is repeated century after century, rehearsed generation after generation and retold year after year. As I have said in my sermon on *Shabbatt Hagadol*, the Shabbat before Pesach, the entire Pesach experience is based on the biblical command: **"And you shall tell it to your children."** This we have certainly done for some 3,200 years. **But, have we ever stopped to wonder why we have to repeat the same thing again and again? Is not once or twice a lifetime enough? Why the systematic retelling?**

In my Shabbat Ha Gadol sermon I said that the most important element of the Seder is to raise questions, particularly from our children. A couple years ago, I heard the head of the Education Department of the Hebrew University address a gathering. During the question period he was asked, "If you could have one successful project in education, what would you choose?"

His answer was, "How to teach clichés to children as if they were newly discovered truths." And, then, he added, "Since we cannot do that, then all we can do is constantly review and repeat great ideals'".

This is an interesting observation. There is really nothing new about truth, honesty, responsibility, peace and freedom. All we really do is teach them anew with every generation. The values are constant and so what is necessary is their teaching and telling. In truth the only variance is in their expression. Great teachings are like drops of water on hard stone. Their

constant application eventually creates a smooth groove. So a mind that is exposed to good values eventually hones into good character.

This is immediately relevant to our being here this morning. **We have come here to remember and, honor those who gave us our ideals, who taught us how to live, who shaped our identities. Reverence for one's past is a Jewish tradition.**

In this connection, a very interesting and sensitive film that we showed a couple of months ago here at Anshe Emeth in our Film Festival, "Lies My Father Told Me." This film deals with the way a child absorbs values from elders.

The movie is based on a conflict between the Zayda (the Grandfather), who on the one hand represents tradition, old and known values and a strong heritage. The father, on the other hand, reflects the yearning for change, the hunger for wealth and the rapid adjustment to the new world. The child is somewhat confused, but eventually opts for the older, warmer and the more human way of life. In real life it is not quite that simple and the choices are never black and white. But, the fact is that we ourselves are at times like the child: confused and conflicted, torn between two worlds. Often, we were blinded by the allure of the new and we neglected the teachings of our elders.

We thought that money would bring us happiness. But, all it brought us was creative comforts, and we are not happier than were our parents.

We believed that education would solve our problems. Well, it did teach us new techniques and we are more knowledgeable. However, we are not wiser than were our grandparents.

We believed that adjustment to our environment would give us a sense of belonging. This process surely added to our cultural backgrounds. But, at the same time, it also weakened our identities, assimilated us and estranged us from our own ways, teachings and traditions.

Considering this, then, perhaps the time has come to rethink our past so that we might better define our future. On this *yizkor* day, it is natural that we should do this because *yizkor* is the Jewish way of remembering from where we have come so that we might know where we are going. If at this very moment I were creating a film, I would call it, "Truths My Father Told Me." I would venture to say that everyone here in this Beith Midrash could collaborate on it with me.

Think about it for a moment. Exactly what did our elders teach us? What did they give us? Listen to the way one writer puts it.

When I was young and fancy free  
My folks had no fine clothes for me  
All I got was words:

Got tzu danken  
Got vet geben  
Zal mir nor leben un zein gezondt

When I was wont to travel far  
They didn't provide for me a car  
All I got was words:

Gey gezondt

I wanted to increase my knowledge  
But, they couldn't send me to college

All I got was words:

Haub sechel

The years have flown, the world has turned,  
Things I have forgotten, things I've learned

Yet I remember:

Zug dem emes

Gib t'zdakah

Haub rachmones

Zei ah mentch

All I got was words.

Somehow or other, wherever we have roamed, how high we have climbed, how much we have achieved, the words of our dear ones are still with us and they echo in our soul.

The following true story indicates how their words, how their love for Judaism, how their feeling for *Yiddishkeit* remains deep within us:

When the first Israeli delegation came to the Soviet Union in 1948, they were invited to the Kremlin for Revolution Day. As each national representation came, they were welcomed and asked to wait and be greeted personally by the head of the Politbureau. Eventually, the turn of the Israelis came. They were ushered into a room in which there were only three chairs. On them

sat Joseph Stalin, Molotov who was head of the Foreign Department and Mrs. Molotov (about whom it was not generally known that she was born Jewish). The conversation was formal.

After the interview was over and the Israelis were about to leave, Mrs. Molotov could not refrain from expressing her feelings so she turned to the nearest Israeli and said: *Az es vet zein gut for eich, es vet zein gut for unz*, "If it 'will be good for you, it will be good for us." The next day Mrs. Molotov was sent to Siberia and she was never heard from again.

What Mrs. Molotov understood was that **Jews are one people—past, present and future**. She sensed that in our time there is a straight line from the ghetto to Israel. Israel is symbolic of the unity and purpose of Jewish existence.

The condition of Israel is a barometer of the mood of Jews throughout the world. When Israel is secure, we are strong. When Israel hurts, we are pained. When Israel succeeds, we are happy.

**These deep feelings about Israel and the Jewish people we took in with our mother's milk.**

The attitudes that we have about Jewish life we absorbed when our fathers patted us on the head. We remember this and that is exactly why we are here this morning—because our parents were good for us. They planted in our hearts the love for Israel, the love for all things Jewish, the love for *menschlichkeit*. If we follow the natural inclination of our hearts and be decent human beings and good Jews, we will find that it will be good for us and eventually good for our community.

Irving Howe in his best selling book on the ghetto entitled *World of Our Fathers* summarizes it this way in one sentence:

"We cannot be our fathers, we cannot live like our mothers, but we may look to their experiences for images of rectitude and purities of devotion."

Guided by these images, we will continue to tell and retell the glories of our tradition in the years to come.

In this hour of remembering, may God give us the capacity to remember all who are not physically with us anymore.

May God give us the courage of teaching our children about them.

May God strength our memory to tell our children about their lives, their experiences, their questions and why their lives were so unique.

Ken Yehi ratzon. May be this God's will. Chag sameach.