

GENERATIONS

Rabbi Jonathan Aaron, Yom Kippur, September 14, 2013

Seventy five years ago, in 1938, seven families created a center of Jewish life, where they could form their own version of living Judaism, here in Los Angeles. Who were these people? These families were all born around the turn of the 20th century. Most of the men and women who began this temple were from the generation called the “Hard Timers” born from about 1890 through 1908. They fought in World War I, struggled through the depression, and worked their way through World War II. They were the first of 7 generations to be a part of the Temple Emanuel community. Since then a lot has changed, clergy, Prayer books, music, social groups within the synagogue. Each generation was making the old new.

Kohelet, also known as Ecclesiastes, is one of the books from the “Writings” section of the Bible. Tradition maintains that it was written by none other than King Solomon himself, in his old age, looking back on the meaning of life. *Kohelet* believed that “All that was, will be, and all that has been done, will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.” Let’s say that *Kohelet* is correct. That there really *isn’t* anything new under the sun. Every single thing that we consider new is just an extension of what has come before. All this technological change that we keep talking about, how the world is changing so much. A smart phone is just a communication and information device, just like the Shofar, or parchment, or the telegraph, or the newspaper. There is no difference between changing your status on your Facebook page from single to engaged, and my grandmother stopping in at her neighbor’s house to tell her she became engaged, knowing that the neighbor will spread it all around town. It’s the same thing with a different execution.

In Hebrew, the word for history is *Toledot*, which is the word for generations. Our synagogue’s history, is really our synagogue’s generations, the passing down, *l’dor vador*, generation to generation, of our synagogue’s values. In this room we have all of the 6 generations who follow the original “Hard Timers.”

We, the six generations, interact in the world every day. We share the planet, if you will. And yet, there is so much tension that occurs between the generations, so many misunderstandings and hurt feelings, disdain and envy, on all sides of the generational spectrum. It seems like every generation believes other generations are clueless. The economist Thomas Sowell said, “Each new generation born is in effect an invasion of civilization by little barbarians, who must be civilized before it is too late.” The next generation looks back and laughs at the previous generations ineptitude and inability to understand the latest anything. The new are trying to make the old new, and the old are trying to teach the new to do it the old way.

An old man and his grown son are sitting on a park-like bench in front of a home. The son is reading a paper. His father is just sitting quietly. The old man sees a sparrow land on a bush. He asks, “What is that?” the son answers, “A sparrow.” A

moment goes by...Father asks again, "What is that?", the son starts to get a little bothered, "I just told you father, a sparrow." Bird flies up a tree, then comes back down and lands on a rock. The father sees the bird. "What is that?" he asks. The son starts to get truly annoyed, and he says, "A sparrow father, a sparrow, s-p-a-r-r-o-w". Moments later, the father asks, "What is that?" Now the son has lost his temper, "Why are you doing this? I told you so many times, it's a sparrow! Can't you get it?" The father slowly gets up and starts walking into the house. The son asks, "Where are you going?" The old man gestures for the son to wait a minute and he disappears into the house.

A couple of minutes later the old man comes back with a small brown bound book. He opens the pages and points for his son to read an excerpt. He says, "out loud." The son begins to read from the little brown book, his father's journal. "Today my youngest son, who turned three just a few days ago, was sitting with me at the park when a sparrow sat in front of us. My son asked me 21 times what it was, and I answered all 21 times that it was...a sparrow. I hugged him every single time he asked me the same question. Again and again...without getting mad, feeling affection for my innocent little boy."

The man puts down the book, and hugs and kisses his father.

We encounter generational interaction at work, in school, and in our consumer encounters each day. But the most personal contact we have with generations is with our grandparents and parents, our friends, and our children and grandchildren. The divide between generations, in a real sense, comes from our mutual difficulty communicating with each other, and the expectations that a generation within a family puts on others.

When we were growing up, we were fighting for our independence from our parents and their world. As adults, we try to find our place in the world and forge our identity. Then, many of us have children and we try to prepare them for our reality and our world, but they are seeking independence from us. Not only that, but the world they are growing up in, or did grow up in, is so different from the one we experienced, that there can be a true disconnect between what one generation sees as the truth, and what another sees.

Obviously, generational differences are not going to be resolved in this sermon. But today is the time when we do think about those who came before us. We take the time to remember the previous generations who are no longer with us in person, but are still in our hearts and minds. Somehow, when we think about our family members who have passed, we are able to remember them for the good, and accept and understand who they were. Is it possible to do that now, with those we encounter in our lives.

The old shall be made new is advice to the new generations. Think seriously about what *Kohelet* is telling you: there *is* nothing new under the sun. Everything that is

made by a generation needed the previous generations wisdom. We come here on the heels of the generation that came before us, and we are destined to go from this planet and leave it to the generation behind us. The idea of new is really each generation's use of the resources that were left behind by the previous generation.

The new shall be holy is for the previous generations. In this context, treating something as holy is giving it the proper respect and appreciation. This means that the previous generations have to understand that this renewal is going to happen, and accept it as a welcome renewal. It is not each generation's job to tell the next generation what to do, but to be proud of your accomplishments, and hand them over. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding."

How else can we achieve generational harmony? I have a couple of ideas that I believe would have helped the man in our story, and can help us as well.

The first one is the idea of listening. The word "listen" occurs over 1,200 times in the Bible, so our ancestors got the importance of this. There are many kinds of listening. Listening to get information, to refute what is being said, to fix a problem, they are all listening. But I'm talking about a different kind of listening. Just listening, without judgment, with only empathy. Listening that way is the greatest approach to show that even if you don't agree, you are there for the person. It isn't easy to do all the time, I know this from personal experience...sometimes my emotions carry my mind and I find it difficult to really listen and take it in beyond my own monologue in my head. But when I do, there is always a more positive result. What becomes so important about listening, is that it can lead to the next idea, understanding.

Understanding where a person is coming from allows you to acknowledge the differences between you, and can open you up to "who this person in front of me is, and where they came from." The Prophet *Malachai* tells us (3:24), "God will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents." Turn yourself to the other generation, in an open and honest way, keep your heart open. I know that this can be difficult to do. I know that there have been a lot of moments and incidences that serve as a barrier between generations. Understanding each other can lead to the turning of hearts towards each other, and can also lead to patience.

I have heard many stories over the years of parents and children who have lost patience with each other. It has destroyed relationships. Many of the confessions forms you filled out during *Kol Nidre* had patience as the subject. But patience is contagious. If one is treated with patience, s/he will exhibit that same patience. If you start with Listening, it can lead to understanding, and understanding can lead to patience.

Finally, all of it has to be done out of love. Love is the emotion that leads to wanting to listen. Love is the thing that makes you want to understand, love is the place in your heart that requires patience for the ones whom you love. Love allowed the

young man to let go of his anger, his guilt, his impatience. It opened him up and brought about a generational hug and kiss.

Finally, I'd like to bring our generations together. I want you to see each other. See how this room is filled with the six generations of our synagogue community. See how the old and the new and everything in between exist here in this room. Begin here, now, with that generational harmony.

The first generation was "The Good Warriors," born from 1909 to 1928. Tom Brokaw called you the Greatest Generation. Influenced in large part by the depression and World War II, and the Holocaust in Europe, *you worked extremely hard in mostly blue-collar jobs to provide for your families and believed in being a part of a union. If you are a member of this generation, please stand so that we can acknowledge and thank you.*

The next generation was "The Lucky Few," or "Traditionals," or also the "Silent Generation," born between 1929 and 1945. Influential events include: Pearl Harbor, D-Day, and for Jews, the Holocaust. *You were first generation in U.S. history with fewer people than the preceding generation. You sought higher education and white collar careers, and your military service came mostly during peacetime. Would you please stand.*

Then we've got the "Baby Boomers," born between 1946 and 1964. Named boomers because you nearly doubled the population of the previous generation. Sometimes divided into 1946-55 (early boomers) and 1956-65 (late boomers). Influenced mostly by the Dodgers moving to Los Angeles...Vietnam War, civil rights, the Kennedys and Martin Luther King assassinations, Woodstock and Watergate. *Women nearly matched men in education and made strides in the career world. You emphasize strong work ethic, process, and challenging authority. Please stand.*

Next is "Generation X," born between 1965-1980. You were the first generation where more women than men graduated from college. Influential events include Roe vs. Wade, John Lennon's assassination, the Iranian hostages, the Challenger disaster, and the fall of the Berlin wall. *You grew up in a time of the early technological shift. Your generation was the first to begin dealing with divorce and blended families, and was really the first latchkey generation, and as a result, you are independent, resilient and adaptable. Work-life balance became important. Please stand.*

"Generation Y" was born between 1981-2000, you are also called "Millennials". Influential events include: The Oklahoma city bombing, the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, Columbine and September 11th. *You grew up in a more child-centric period, and got a lot of attention. Heavily influenced by technology shifts. You have grown up in a world connected through technology. You value genuine social responsibility and meaningful work, please stand up.*

Lastly are those who belong in “Generation Z,” born in the 21st century. You are also called, “Digital Natives,” because you will never know a time without digital devices at your fingertips. *We don't know yet what events will influence you the most, but one must imagine that the first black President, 9/11, and gay marriage will be a part of what forms your generation. Is there anyone here that is in Generation Z?*

Take a look around. All of you are here. All six generations. No matter our differences. No matter what era we belong to by virtue of the accident of birth, there is one thing we all share in common. It connects every member of every generation at this Temple, and thousands of generations before them. It is the chord that binds us all together, no matter what era we were born. Judaism. Jewish tradition. Hearing *Kol Nidre*. Singing the *Shema*, reciting the *Kaddish* over a loved one, Shabbat, Torah. Each word conjures up images of experiences, and these experiences are shared between all generations of Jews, in this sanctuary and throughout time. Here it is. This is what makes the old and the new, holy.