

I have spent a lot of time this past week thinking about the past, and the future, and the passing of generations. Just before last Shabbos, we found out that my grandfather had passed away suddenly. He was my last living grandparent, my last link to an entire generation and an entire period of history. And while I do not want to eulogize my grandfather just now, I would like to share a thought, in the context, of this week's parshah, about where the Jewish people have been and where the Jewish people are going.

My grandfather was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1932. He grew up as part of a community, and as part of a generation, which was completely suffused with Jewish identity. My grandfather's parents were immigrants from a shtetl in Belarus, and their immediate community in Detroit was largely populated by immigrants from the same shtetl. My grandfather, like many of his peers, did not speak English until he went to kindergarten -- Yiddish was the only language spoken at home. As was common, my grandfather grew up not only with his immediate family but with his grandparents, uncles and aunts, often sharing the same home together. Like many of his peers, he went to Hebrew school until he was fourteen or fifteen. And like many of his peers, he grew up in a culture where *yiddishkeit* was simply a given -- *yamim tovim* were part of the rhythm of life, chickens were kashered in the kitchen as they were in the old country, and borscht was at least as common as apple pie.

But within a generation, at most two, that whole world was gone. So many of the children who grew up speaking only Yiddish, and certainly their own children, embraced America for everything it had to offer and never looked back. How, exactly, did this happen? How did so many people raised in an American shtetl leave it behind so completely?

Many books have been written on this topic, and many more will be written. It is a significant part of the story of American Jewry. But I would like to offer just one thought on the matter.

Parshas Noach introduces us to two *tzaddikim* -- Noach, the subject of much of the parshah, and Avraham, who appears at the very end of the parshah. Noach and Avraham are often contrasted with one another, an analysis that is found in the Midrash and Rashi's comments in the very beginning of the parshah. And one important difference between these *tzaddikim* is found not in their personalities or achievements but in the tasks they were given to accomplish.

Noach's task was to preserve the world. The world as it was needed to be destroyed and brought back again, and Noach was charged with maintaining what was left of the world in the *teivah* and then beginning the process of repopulating and rebuilding it. The world needed to survive and continue, and Noach assured that it would. Avraham, on the other hand, is not asked simply to keep the world going. Avraham is asked to move the world forward, to perfect and shape it, to found the nation that would be the vehicle for taking the world through history towards its destiny. It is instructive that one of the primary allusions to the role of Avraham is found in the beginning of Parshas Bereishis. אלה תולדות השמים והארץ בהבראם -- *these are the happenings of the heaven and earth when*

*they were created.* Our Sages teach that the word בהבראם , *when they were created*, can be arranged to spell באברהם, *through Avraham*. They are the same thing: Avraham is engaged in creating something new, in taking the world as it existed and introducing a new way of devotion to Hashem that would help move the world forward.

Noach and Avraham both are granted a *bris*, a covenant with Hashem. But the nature of Noach's *bris* is straightforward -- the rainbow provides a sign of Hashem's guarantee that the world would continue to exist, that a flood would never again wipe out all of mankind. Avraham's *bris*, on the other hand, is about what Avraham will do -- it is the *bris milah*, the circumcision by which we take the human body and, at Hashem's instruction, make it more perfect, shaping our lives to be more in accordance with Hashem's will. Noach, the *tzaddik*, accomplishes everything Hashem asks -- he keeps the world going. Avraham is not asked just to keep the world going; he makes it more perfect.

With not a small amount of trepidation, I suspect that many people came to this country with an eye towards preserving the heritage they had been given. They were committed to being faithful to their parents and ancestors; they taught their children to carry on the ways of those who came before. Preserving the past is at the heart of *yiddishkeit*. But it is not enough. For the children of Avraham, our task is never simply to keep the world going, to look only backwards to make sure we are faithful to the past. It is to create the present and to move forward to the future. It is to come to an understanding of the way in which Torah holds the key to our success, how our personal and national goals will be fulfilled through the Torah, how the challenges of this generation will be met by being innovative and appreciating the unique lessons the Torah has to teach our generations and the ones to follow. Torah cannot be preserved as a relic of the past. It must be the key to our future.

I hope that I do not come across as advocating something unorthodox, or, *chas v'shalom*, un-Orthodox. Of course, the past holds everything we need to find our way forward. But if our attitude is simply to preserve what we have been given, it is extremely difficult to create the future. We need to teach our children and ourselves that we are engaged in בהבראם, in creating, in living the Torah today so that we can move ourselves ever closer to the destiny of tomorrow. And we have to be both alive to the challenges of our generation and creative and innovative in facing them. נצח ישראל -- we are the eternal people; not because of where we have been but because, with Hashem's help, of where we are going.