

A Chain of Tradition
Rabbi Mona Alfi
Shabbat Shavuot - May 29, 2020

There is an ancient story found in Midrash Rabba, a fourth century collection of stories on the Bible, that tells of a conversation between God and the Jewish people.

“When the Jewish people stood before Sinai to receive the Torah, G-d said to them: "I swear, I will not give you the Torah unless you provide worthy guarantors who will assure me that you will observe its laws."

Our ancestors responded, "Ribonno shel olam – Master of the Universe, our matriarchs and patriarchs will be our guarantors!"

"Your guarantors themselves require guarantors!" was God's reply.

"Master of the world," the Jews exclaimed, "our prophets will guarantee our observance of the Torah."

"I have grievances against them, too. 'The shepherds have rebelled against Me' (Jeremiah 2:8)," G-d replied. "Bring proper guarantors and only then will I give you the Torah."

As a last resort, the Jews declared, "our children will serve as our guarantors!"

"They truly are worthy guarantors," G-d replied. "Because of them I will give you the Torah." ” (Midrash Rabba, Song of Songs 1:4)

What this midrash is basically saying is that we were given the Torah not because of our own merit, or the merit of our ancestors or our scholars, or our leaders. We were given the Torah only because of our children.

In other words, God knew that the only way to get us to behave better would be for the sake of our children. In each and every generation, it is for the sake of our children having a better life that makes us want to

work harder. It is our youth who give us hope that they will be the ones to create a better reality than the one we have given them.

Tonight is the second night of the Festival of Shavuot, the holiday when we celebrate the giving of the Torah at Sinai. It is the night when we should be celebrating not only this festival, but also celebrating the Confirmation Class of 2020.

Temple B'nai Israel was an early adopter of Confirmation. If you have ever been in our Heritage Hall you've seen that amongst our archival treasures and histories are photos of Confirmation classes from the last 100 years.

The introduction of Confirmation as a Jewish lifecycle event coincides with the introduction of adolescence into society. By the mid to late 1800s in the US we didn't consider 13 year olds adults anymore. And those children who received a formal secular education tended to continue on until at least 16 before they were expected to work. In addition, Confirmation allowed for Jewish girls to study alongside their male peers and also have their Jewish education acknowledged and celebrated.

Early on with the introduction of Confirmation, the Reform movement began the tradition of holding the ceremony on Shavuot. Because Shavuot commemorates and celebrates not only the giving of Torah on Sinai, but also the Jewish people choosing to receive it.

Why do I distinguish between the Torah being given, and our choosing to receive it? Because it is a reminder that to be Jewish is to be part of a sacred covenant – a covenant, and not something that was forced upon us. But rather, we believe that God and the people of Israel both had to choose to be in a relationship with each other.

When a child turns 13 and the community celebrates that child becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, an adult in our community, it is the community inviting this young adult to join us.

But we in essence wait for three years, until that child has achieved some more maturity, has studied at a higher level for them to respond, as an adult, that they are also committed to being part of our community.

And that is what Confirmation is, it is the young adult saying, "I'm in. I'm claiming this heritage as my own." And nowadays, they do so not because of pressure from their parents or from tradition, but of their own free will.

Each of our Confirmation students chooses to take on this extra responsibility, on top of all of their other commitments and stresses, to come to the temple to study weekly with me, and with their classmates. Throughout the year they wrestle with what it means to them to be a Jew, what it means to make Jewish choices, and to be part of something larger than themselves.

One of the most rewarding things that I get to do as a rabbi is to study with these students. From September through May, I meet almost every week with our 10th graders. We schmooze, we study, we talk about the big issues of the day, we debate our different points of views and try to understand how Jewish values can guide us.

That does not mean they coming away believing in, or agreeing with, everything that Judaism teaches. Many wrestle with the idea of God. Others share stories of anti-Semitism, or their own personal struggles. Some acknowledge that they were less than enthusiastic about having to go to religious school, and skeptical at the beginning of the Confirmation year about whether or not they wanted to be a part of it.

However, by the end of the year what they come away with is an understanding of the dynamic nature of Judaism, that is something that can grow with them, and is a viable roadmap for finding meaning, comfort and community.

By the end of the Confirmation year they know that it wasn't empty words when we told them at their B'nai Mitzvah that we see them as adults in our community. When they stand on the bimah and give their

personal statements, they know that we want to know what they have to say. They know that their presence is valued in our community.

They see the pride shining from our faces as we get to hear each one of them making a personal statement of what it means to them to be a Jew, and why they have chosen to reaffirm their commitment to Judaism and the Jewish community.

And at the Confirmation celebration on Shavuot, our students stand before us not as individuals on the bimah, but as a community, a community that they have created, a community that gives us hope that the future will be better than the present.

When the Pandemic curtailed the way we lived every day life, the Confirmation class moved online. We continued to meet weekly on Zoom.

And I found that the experience both inspired and saddened me. On one hand, these young adults are amazing. Their commitment to each other, their curiosity, the desire to learn for it's own reward, their tenacity, and ability to try to make the best of a difficult situation, all of these things made me look forward to seeing them each week. But I also came away saddened knowing that I couldn't give them what they wanted, just a little bit of normalcy, of being able to sit in a room together, and to be with each other, in person.

When I gave them the choice to hold the Confirmation service as scheduled tonight, but via Zoom, or to wait until some future date when they could all stand on the bimah together, they unanimously responded that they wanted to wait until they could celebrate this milestone in person.

We are taught in Judaism that we are part of a great chain of tradition, a shalshet hakabbalah, a chain that dates back from Sinai until today. And that every generation is entrusted with a link in this sacred chain.

At times the chain can feel as solid as iron as it anchors us with wisdom and traditions passed down from generation to generation. At other times it feels as delicate and fragile as a golden chain. And at other

times still the chain feels like it is something that we are grasping for like a life-line thrown to rescue us from life's stormy sea.

When I think of the shalsholet hakabbalah – this is how I think of it, each link, bearing different qualities, qualities that were needed by the generation that forged it. Each link is distinct, beautiful in its own way, and scarred and scratched up a bit, in its own way as well.

As I think of this year's Confirmation class, of Zac, Ben, Henry, Evan, Heidi, Adam, Dylan, Ethan, Natalie, Sophia, Harris, Hudson, Kieran, Nate and Noah, I wonder how each of them will look back at this time and see how what they went through will shape not only their own lives, but the future of the Jewish people as well.

What will their link in this shalsholet hakabbalah look like? Will it be strong and sturdy? Ornate or simple? Or will it be wireless with Bluetooth capacity? Will they help us learn how to create a community that is not confined to a building? Will it be a community that is truly inclusive and embracing of our differences? Will it be a community that is us afraid to take their values and faith into the streets to stop injustice?

Only time will tell us what this generation will do with what fate has dealt them, what lessons they have learned and what they have to teach us.

As a rabbi, as a parent, and as a bit of a control freak, it is frustrating to me that we cannot determine what the next link that comes after us will look like, nor can we determine how others will perceive, or if they will even want, the link that our generation has created. The best we can do is to provide a strong space for the next generation to latch onto as they go forward into the world.

As I look back at this year, I am filled with such pride and hope, for the future of our people, and our country because of the students who I have been privileged to study with. They have not inherited a world that is at peace with itself. It is a world filled with conflicts and plagues and urgent matters that need our attention.

But tonight, tonight I am also sad. I am sad that I am not sharing the bimah with those 15 amazing souls. I am sad that I can not stand with them before the open ark as they take the Torah into our midst. I am sad that all of you do not get to see for yourselves how wonderful they are.

But I hope that you will be able to join us in September, when we will find a way to gather even if it means us having to spread out all over Land Park with a loud speaker, so that we can celebrate their study and listen to what they have to teach us.

Because this I know to be true. The more we are willing to listen to our young adults, the better our odds of not merely getting through this distressing time, but of finding a better way to live together in peace and in harmony.

(Thank you to the amazing and incomparable Joan Cusick who took these photos at our banquet last November where we celebrated our 170th anniversary. One photo is of all of our Confirmands, past and present, who were there. The other photo is of some of our families who have multiple generations who were Confirmed at B'nai Israel. Both photos include our wonderful Rabbi Emeritus, Lester Frazin.)