

Behukotai: Graduating Seniors Message
May 8, 2010

It was announced earlier this week that after four years of research 57 scientists who analyzed a bone fossil have concluded that modern human beings bred with Neanderthals tens of thousands of years ago.

I don't know about you, but I found the discovery to be exciting and fascinating. Exciting and fascinating because it points out that there is still so much we don't yet know about the world, and so much for us to yet learn and discover – about our origins and our past, as well as about the future and where we are headed.

On the opening words of this week's Torah reading, "*Eem behukotai talechu, ve'eem bemitzvotai tishmoru...* If you walk according to My laws, and keep my commandments and do them...." Rabbi Abraham Twerski explains that to walk is to proceed, to progress. Or as the Hasidic master, Rav Bunam put it - the verse comes to teach us not to be complacent, standing in one place. We should always seek and aspire to learn more, to improve ourselves, to make things better.

I think that one of Judaism's many gifts to the world is an outlook which does not tolerate or embrace complacency. From our earliest days, Judaism has taught the value of adopting a posture towards the world in which we are partners with God. This means that we have an obligation not to be passive. God continued to create the world after the first day. After reflecting on what He had done, He said, Vayehi tov, and it was good. But He did not rest on his laurels and stop after the first day. Yet when God got to the sixth day, with the creation of human life, He was able to recognize that there now would be individuals who could carry on the task of continuing to create, of continuing to discover new things about the world. That is why our ancestors taught that we are God's partners in creation. The unfolding drama of history continues and the human saga is still being written.

Today we celebrate our children who will soon be leaving the safe nest of their parents' homes, of the community they lived in and the place where they were raised and nourished. Most, if not all will be going on to continue their education, because that is what they are supposed to do.

The world they face is one fraught with challenges, and in some instances dangers as well. Just this past week, a terrorist sought to set off a bomb in Times Square, and a promising young woman was killed on her college campus in Virginia.

What do we hope for our children as they graduate from high school?

For one, we hope they will be safe. As they enter an uncertain world, and leave the protecting care of the families that love them, we let them go, knowing that they now must make their own judgments. We hope that the values we have tried to teach them will guide them along the way. So we pray that God will watch over and protect them,

and that they will have the ability to be discerning, discriminating, wise and prudent in the decisions they will make.

We also pray that they will continue to grow and to learn, that the pursuit of knowledge will give them fulfillment, as well as the hunger to learn more. But even more: that they will contribute to expanding our understanding of the world. In the tradition of our ancestors, who taught that the bashful cannot learn, they should never be afraid to ask questions, to challenge the status quo, or to go against the common grain. This is how we expand on what came before us.

Finally, I would hope that the children realize and appreciate the central role that being a Jew plays in defining who and what they are, and that it is at the core of their essence and identity. It plays a crucial role in how they view the world, for it certainly is how the world views them. This means taking at least one course in a subject that will deal with being Jewish – it could be about the Holocaust, or some facet of Jewish history. It could be about Jewish philosophy or literature, the Hebrew or Yiddish language. In other words, don't let your pursuit of knowledge be confined to secular subjects. This is a wonderful time to expand your understanding and appreciation of the very rich heritage about which you probably know far less than you do about most other subjects. As you go off to places of higher education to learn and study, taking courses in a wide plethora of subjects, don't forget to learn and study about Judaism.

This connection to your Jewish heritage also entails seeking out the Jewish organizations and your fellow Jews on campus. Jewish life is not lived alone, but in the context of community. Allow yourselves to explore the beauty and power of mitzvot, of living a life with God and in harmony with our tradition.

The unfortunate reality is that today's college campuses have also become breeding grounds for hostility towards Jews, especially the concept and reality of the homeland of the Jewish people. Stereotypes and misinformation in the guise of accusations against the supposed injustice of the Jewish state are thin masks over layers of anti-Semitism. Even Jewish students fall prey to the bitter and vicious portrayals of the state of Israel. I hope that our children will travel to Israel and see for themselves, firsthand the miracle of our rebirth and what Israel has achieved and accomplished as a nation in the face of insurmountable difficulties.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, suggests that when God tells Avram, "go from the land of your birth, from your father's house, to the place that I will show you," God is teaching a fundamental lesson—"*l'chol makom she'adam holeych, hu holeych l'shorsho* wherever you go, you are going to your root source." "*Kee b'vadai b'oto hamakom yesh shorsho, v'tzareech l'ha'alot otan ha-n'tzotzot* For surely in that place is your root source, and you need to bring up the sparks related to your core."

Kedushat Levi, the work of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak suggests that our journey in life is actually a constant journey toward God, and that this path is really an inward journey. It is one that challenges us to pull away the coverings that we so carefully place upon our hearts. So *lekh l'kha*, the command given to Abraham with which the journey of the Jewish

people begins, is really a charge, demanding "go forth": *"l'vadcha l'shorshcha l'ha'alot otan ha-n'tzotzot* "Go forth, we are told, "on your own, to your source, and raise up those sparks," the blessings that belong uniquely to you.

When we view our parashah and life itself through this perspective, we understand more fully the integration of the intellectual and the spiritual journey. God invites us to be partners, to embark upon a world of mitzvot as a means of traveling along a path as individuals and as a community. When we truly engage in the deepest essence of this path, God tells us, *"v'natatee meeshkanee b'toch'chem* I will establish My dwelling place in your midst" . . . He assures us, *v'heethalachtee b'toch'chem, v'hayeetee lachem layloheem, v'atem t'h'yu lee l'am* Then I will walk in your midst; I will be your God, and you shall be my people." (Lev. 26:11-12).

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