

## Ha-azinu By Rabbi Harold Berman September 26, 2020 Rabbi Noah Farkas

We all There is a stirring passage that begins the second part of today's Torah reading – stirring to us, but remarkably strange if you think of the context.

The passage is: "*Z'chor y'mot olam, binu sh'not dor vador, sh'al avicha veyagaydcha, z'kaynecha v'yomru lach* – Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past, ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will speak with you."

It's very precious advice, most of us would think. If you want the voice of experience, the learned voice of generations that preceded you, go and ask the elders, the parents and grandparents, and you will get the benefit of what they have seen in their own days.

But wait a minute! This is a poem that is supposed to be written by Moses and taught by Moses to the people of Israel as they are about to make their way into the Promised Land. Who are the grandparents here?

This is a little awkward, because the grandparents in this generation are the people of the wilderness. They are the people who have given Moses so much grief as they made their way through the wilderness. Their parents were the ones who weren't ready to go into the land when Joshua and Caleb and the other spies came back with their report. The parents were afraid. The grandparents of the next generation were the oldest of the children who watched this, and they gave Moses plenty of grief as they made their way through the wilderness. We've got lots of stories about them: complaining about the food, the water, and just about everything else.

Yet, we might, and perhaps must, conclude from the story, that for all their complaining, the people of this generation learned something along the way. They saw the bad stuff, they struggled in the face of hardships and they learned something. Ask them, says Moses, and they will tell you. Moses isn't afraid to have these people be the teachers because these people's experience will lead them to share a positive message, and their message will be valuable.

It happens all the time. We tend to think that former generations were very different, even tempered, obedient and reliable, when they were young, as the song goes, "perfect in every way," and all the more so as they grew older. In reality nearly every generation has had its rebelliousness, has seen its trials, and yet has emerged with something to teach those who will follow.

As I grew up, most of the grandparents in my neighborhood were not only from a different era, they were also from a very different continent and different culture. They spoke a different language. Their religious commitments came from another place entirely.

This generation seemed to many of us as somewhat marginal not only because of language and culture issues, but also because they tended to be less educated. They had made their way to America without the benefits of higher education. They had worked hard from the day they arrived so their children could have something better. That was the story of my grandparents, on both sides of my family. My parents were the educated professionals who had built a different life for themselves.

My grandparents were, in their quiet way, the Jewish role models. They did that well. They were the link to another world, and as I grew older, that link became even more important. My grandparents were the ones who went to services, kept kosher, and observed Shabbat. It was my grandfather who taught me about Tefillin, just by putting them on whenever he stayed over at our house. I learned by watching. The grandparents didn't impose anything, but they taught a great deal.

In later years, when I got rebellious, and went through the very tough teenage years, I broke family traditions and went to shul every week and started keeping Kosher and putting on Tefillin. It was my grandparents to whom I turned.

I learned a lot from my grandparents, but I realize, looking back, that I really didn't ask enough. I didn't ask enough about their experience in coming to America and finding their way in a different culture. My grandfather had come as a young teen with his father, and then worked to bring over the rest of the family. My grandmother had come as a young bride. I wish I knew more about their struggles, their adventures, and the challenges they learned to overcome. Sure, I could have asked them more questions about my parents and my aunts and uncles as well, but the really important things I didn't know enough to ask.

There is a lot to be learned from the experience of an earlier generation, because as generations go on, their struggles and adventures are really more relevant and instructive than we think. There is a lot to talk about. Someday I hope my grandchildren will ask me. After all, I'll be the religious grandfather who puts on tefillin, goes to shul, and keeps Shabbat, although I hope their parents will, too. I hope my grandchildren will think I have something to say about life in general, and I hope they'll be willing to listen.

### **Questions:**

- I. In what ways are previous generations role models for us today and in what ways do they have nothing to add?**
- II. What did you learn from your parents and grandparents? Did you learn it all at once or did understanding come slowly over time? What did you learn about Judaism from your family**
- III. Generations make a difference. What did you learn from your grandparents that was different than what you learned from your parents?**
- IV. What questions did you never ask them that today you wish you could?**
- V. There are those who, for many reasons, have to grow up without parents or grandparents. Where can you go to learn life's important lessons if you don't have a previous generation to turn to?**
- VI. The world is changing at an ever more rapid pace. Why do previous generations still have things to teach us?**
- VII. In what ways do you influence your children and grandchildren. What life lessons are you teaching them? What Jewish lessons are you teaching them?**