

The Decline of the Generations

Introduction

In this week’s Torah portion, *Haazinu*, Moses tells the Israelites to remember their people’s past:

זְכוֹר יָמֹת עוֹלָם בֵּינֵנוּ שָׁנוֹת דּוֹר־דּוֹר שֶׁאֵל אָבִיךָ יִגְדֶּלְךָ וְזָקְנֶיךָ יִנְאָמְרוּ לָךְ
Remember the days of old. Consider the years of generation after generation. Ask your father and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you. [Deut. 32:7]

He then warns them that prosperity (growing “fat, thick and rotund”) and contact with idolaters will cause them to fall away from their faith, so they should keep alive their connection with their past.

Yeridat HaDorot

Strong rabbinic doctrine: *Yeridat HaDorot* – the decline of the generations. Successive generations are further and further away from the revelation at Sinai, and so their spirituality and ability to understand the Torah weakens steadily.

Also, errors of transmission may have been introduced, especially considering a lot of the Law was oral:

מֹשֶׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי, וּמִסָּרָה לִיהוֹשֻׁעַ, וִיהוֹשֻׁעַ לַזִּקְנִים, וְזִקְנִים לַנְּבִיאִים, וְנְבִיאִים מִסְּרֻהָ לְאַנְשֵׁי כְנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה
Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. [Avot 1:1]

The Mishnah mourns the Sages of ages past and the fact that they will never be replaced:

When Rabbi Meir died, the composers of parables ceased.
When Ben Azzai died, diligence in studying [Torah] ceased.
When Ben Zoma died, excellence in exposition ceased.
When Rabbi Yehoshua died, goodness ceased from the world.
When Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel died... troubles multiplied.

When Rabbi Akiba died, the glory of the Torah ceased.
When Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa died, men of wondrous deeds ceased.
When Rabbi Yose Katnuta died, piety ceased...
When Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai died, the splendor of wisdom ceased.
When Rabban Gamaliel the elder died, the glory of the Torah ceased...
When Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] died, humility and fear of sin ceased...

Rabbi Eliezer the Great says: From the day the Temple was destroyed, the sages began to be like scribes, scribes like synagogue-attendants, synagogue-attendants like common people, and the common people became more and more debased. And nobody seeks. [Sotah 9:15]

The Talmud abounds with statements to that effect:

The elders of [the generation of the Exodus] said:
The face of Moses [was as bright] as the face of the sun.
The face of Joshua was like the face of the moon. [It did not generate light, only reflected it.]
Woe for this embarrassment, woe for this disgrace, [that we did not merit another leader of the stature of Moses]. [Bava Batra 75a]

From the time when Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi died [the last three prophets], the Divine Spirit departed from the Jewish people. [Sotah 48b]

Rava bar Zimuna said: If the early generations were sons of angels, then we are sons of men. And if the early generations were sons of men, then we are like asses. [Shabbat 112b]

Rabbi Yohanan said: A fingernail of the [early sages] is worth more than the belly of the [later sages]. [Yoma 9b]

Rabbi Yohanan said: The hearts [i.e., the wisdom] of the early Sages were like the doorway to the Entrance Hall of the Temple, [which was 20x40 cubits], and the hearts of the later Sages were like the doorway to the Sanctuary, [which was 10x20].
As for us, [today], [our hearts] are like the eye of a fine needle. [Eruvin 53a]

Rav Pappa said to Abaye: What is different about the earlier generations, for whom miracles occurred, while miracles do not occur for us? ...
Abaye replied: The previous generations were wholly dedicated to the sanctification of God's name, while we are not as dedicated. [Berachot 20a]

Rav Sherira Gaon (10th-century Babylonia) argues that it is this concern that prompted Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi to codify the Oral Law, the Mishna:

When Rabbi saw such diversity in the teachings of the Sages, even though they all shared the same underlying principles, he feared that the teachings would not endure and would be lost. He saw that understanding was diminished; the wellsprings of wisdom were being blocked up... It is as they say [in the Talmud]: ... "If the earlier scholars were sons of men, then we are like asses." [Iggeret of Rav Sherira Gaon]

Practical impact

Mishnah:

No court may set aside the decision of another [earlier] court unless it is greater than it in wisdom and in number. If it was greater than it in wisdom but not in number, in number but not in wisdom, it may not set aside its decision. [Eduyyot 1:5]

Rabbis may not challenge earlier rulings.

Maimonides elaborates and expands:

If a Supreme Court issued a decree or enacted an ordinance or introduced a custom, which has become widespread throughout Israel, and a subsequent court desires to abolish the instructions of the predecessors and to eradicate that particular ordinance, decree or custom, it cannot do so, unless it is superior both in wisdom and in number. If it exceeds the other court in wisdom but not in number, or in number but not in wisdom, it cannot annul its instructions.

Even if the reason for which the predecessors introduced the decree or ordinance exists no more, the successors cannot revoke anything introduced by the predecessors unless they exceed them.

[Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Rebels 2:2]

Should laws be observed even though the stated reason no longer applies? The unanimous consensus is yes:

-The reason given is not necessarily the only reason. Even if the practical reason is the only one, there may still be a mystical one.

-Acts of a Sanhedrin can only be changed by a later Sanhedrin of greater authority [and there is no Sanhedrin today]. [Kessef Mishneh, Hilchot Mamrim 2:2]

Examples:

-Yom Tov Sheni in Diaspora because didn't know when the exact day was. Now we know. But the practice remains.

-The Ten Commandments were included in the Temple service, and then were removed. The Talmud says:

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel: [The Sages] wished to recite [the Ten Commandments with the Shema] ... but soon abolished them

because of the arguments of the minim [heretics], [that the Ten Commandments were the only valid part of the Torah. Later still, more rabbis wanted to reinstitute them but were rebuffed.] [Berachot 12a; also in Mishna 5:1 in Tamid 32b]

-No conversions to Judaism in Argentina.

-In rare exceptions, practice *is* changed. Example:

-Mishna [Terumot 8:4]: Three kinds of liquids become forbidden if left uncovered: water, wine, and milk. Reason: A poisonous snake may have left some venom in them.

-Jewish law [Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 116:1]: Now that poisonous snakes are not found among us, one may drink uncovered beverages.

-But Vilna Gaon refused to accept the change.

Limits of decline

The decline refers to the ability to understand true meaning of Torah and issue valid rulings in Jewish law – not to the acquisition of new knowledge or advances in technology. We know more, but are less wise.

Practical reasons

Ensures continuity. Minimizes changes in practice.

Equivalent: Power of the precedent in secular law. People must know what to expect.

People like to say “They don't make them like they used to” or bemoan “the good old days”.

We can't help being influenced by surrounding cultures.

Secondary effect: Promotes pessimism and depression: Are we inexorably sinking in an abyss?

Contrary opinions

1-Mystics: Principle does not apply to spirituality.

-There are two types of knowledge: Nigleh (Revealed) and Nistar (Concealed). In Nigleh, the generations are indeed declining, but in

Nistar they are improving and raise us closer to God. From Moshe Cordovero (the Ramak) to Isaac Luria (the Arizal) to the Baal Shem Tov (founder of Hassidism), we are making steady progress.

-There is more study of kabbalah now than in the past because we are on a higher spiritual level and better able to understand it.

-Earlier generations were closer to Sinai, but we are closer to light of Messiah. [(Hassidic) Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, 18th-century Galicia, Midrash Pinchas, p. 82]

-Fallacy: Is that light retroactive?

-The Ba'al Shem Tov is quoted as saying flatly:

Our period enjoys superiority over those that preceded it. [Cited in Marcus' Ha-Chassidut, pp 14-15]

-Rav Kook, 20th-century chief rabbi of Mandatory Palestine, adds:

The theory of evolution, which is now conquering the world, is in greater accord with the secrets of the Kabbalah than any other philosophical theory... All of existence has evolved and become [spiritually] elevated. [Orot ha-Kodesh 2, p 537]

2-History does show improvement:

-Rejection of idolatry (rampant for 1,000 years).

-Rejection or placing on hold of slavery, polygamy, sotah, captive woman, death penalty, animal sacrifices (allowed by Torah).

-Turn to study and prayer.

3-Maimonides frequently questioned earlier statements:

-What earlier Sages said on non-legal matters does not have to be accepted. Example: Astrology:

Astrology is a disease, not a science... It is a tree under the shadow of which all sorts of superstitions thrive. ... Only fools and charlatans lend value to it. [Responsa 2, 25b]

He then tackles the thorny point that many Talmudic rabbis believed in astrology:

I know that you may... find sayings of... sages in the Talmud and Midrashim whose words appear to maintain that at the moment of a man's birth, the stars will cause such and such to happen to him. Do not regard this as a difficulty...

Possibly the matter was hidden from them.

Or there may be an allusion in those words.

Or they may have been said with a view to the times and the business before them. (You surely know how many of the verses of the Torah are not to be taken literally...) [Rambam, Letter on Astrology]

-He was not a Bible-inerrantist: The Torah is not intended to be history or science, but ethical teachings:

Those passages in the Bible, which, in their literal sense, contain statements that can be refuted by proof, can and must be interpreted otherwise. [Rambam, Guide to the Perplexed, 2:25]

-He changed established practice by allowing converts to say “God of our fathers” in prayers, which they were not allowed to say up to that point, because their “fathers” were not Jewish. Indeed, the Mishna in Bikkurim does not allow it. The Babylonian Talmud has no Gemara in Bikkurim, and hence implicitly accepts the Mishna. [B. Bikkurim 1:4]

But the Jerusalem Talmud allows it! [J. Bikkurim 1:4, 64a] Normally, when the two Talmuds differ the Bavli wins. But Maimonides ruled in favor of the Yerushalmi. In his letter to a convert named Obadiah, he says:

You ask me if you, too, are allowed to say... “Our God and God of our fathers”, “who has sanctified us through His commandments”, “who has separated us”, “who has chosen us”, “who has given to our fathers to inherit [a pleasant, good and spacious land]”, “who has brought us out of the Land of Egypt”, “who has worked miracles to our fathers”, and more of this kind. Yes, you may say all this in the prescribed order and not change it in the least...

His ruling was accepted.

-He said that animal sacrifices were mandated in Torah *only* because Jews were not ready for more refined types of divine service:

The custom in those days among all men...consisted in sacrificing animals. God did not command us to give up these services; for this would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used.

Sacrifices [however] are not the primary object [of the commandments about sacrifice], prayers are. [To wit,] we were not commanded to sacrifice in every place, and in every time, or to build a Temple in every place, or to allow anybody to become a priest and sacrifice.

-Only one Temple has been appointed, and only, [as the Torah says,] “in the place which the Lord shall choose” [Deut. 12:26]. In no other place are we allowed to sacrifice. [The Torah says,] “Be careful not to give your burnt-offerings in every place that you see.” [Deut. 12:13];

-and only the members of a particular family were allowed to officiate as priests.

All these restrictions served to limit this kind of worship.

But prayer and supplication can be offered everywhere and by every person. Because of this, the Prophets rebuke people for being over-zealous in bringing sacrifices. [Moreh Nevuchim (Guide for the Perplexed) 3:32]

Israeli professor Menachem Kellner argues that the Rambam did not subscribe to *yeridat hadorot*. [Kellner, Maimonides on the Decline of the Generations, 1996].

Conclusion

The rabbinic doctrine on the decline of the generations has contributed to preserving Judaism and Jewish practices and ensuring uniformity and continuity. It should not, however, be used to inhibit necessary evolution or conclude that our mental faculties are diminishing.

Shabbat shalom.