

Building a Jewish Future: Thoughts for Parashat Vayiggash

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By

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayiggash

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Some years ago, I gave a lecture at the New York Public Library. Afterwards, a woman from the audience came up to speak with me. She told me that she was a Holocaust survivor. After the war, she came to the United States, married and had four children. With tears in her eyes, she went on to tell me that just the previous week her fourth child had been married to a non-Jew. In fact, all four of her children were now married out of the faith, and none of them were engaged in raising Jewish families.

“If I had known this would happen,” she lamented, “I would rather have perished in the concentration camp.”

I offered this woman whatever feeble words of comfort I could devise, but I could not begin to assuage the intensity of her sense of tragedy in her life. I asked her what synagogue she attended, thinking that I might consult further with her rabbi. She answered: “I don’t belong to a synagogue. I have never attended a synagogue. We are not religious.”

This woman, like so many other Jews, has assumed that children and grandchildren somehow inherit a strong feeling of Jewishness. Of course, this assumption is false, disproved virtually every day of the week and in almost every family. Judaism and Jewishness are transmitted meaningfully only where there is a commitment to Jewish observance and Jewish education.

Many Jews do not wish to confront this message. They point to examples of non-observant individuals who have transmitted Jewish identity. They also point to examples of religious families whose children have married out of their faith and/or who do not live active Jewish lives. Yet, one must look at the total picture and not simply point to the exceptional cases. Demographic studies have shown conclusively that Jewish continuity is directly correlated to the level of Jewish

observance, education and commitment.

The Talmud, Berakhot 8a, teaches that one who does not frequent the synagogue “causes exile for himself and his children.” This statement has proven to be true, not only on a homiletic level but in its literal meaning. Praying regularly in synagogue is a reflection of a world view. One who takes the synagogue seriously is also one who is more likely to take other aspects of Judaism seriously. Moreover, those who are most attached to the synagogue are also those who are most likely to see to it that they, their children and grandchildren are involved in meaningful Jewish living and learning.

The synagogue is a repository of Jewish spirituality, learning and social commitment. It is a place where we strengthen ourselves as individuals, and join together in strengthening our community. It has a special quality: the more we experience its message, the more deeply connected we are with it.

Each individual must assume personal responsibility for the flourishing of Jewish life. Our homes should reflect our Jewish ideas and ideals, our traditions and our values.

This week’s Torah portion informs us that Jacob sent his son Judah to Goshen, ahead of the rest of the family (46:28). Rabbinic tradition has it that Judah’s task was to set up a house of teaching, so that when the family arrived in Goshen they would find a place already set up for them to come together for study and discussion. This has been a hallmark of the Jewish people since then: to set up schools and study halls, to create an environment for religious learning and exploring, to transmit the essential ingredients for a happy and identified Jewish life.

Jewish identity and values are not transmitted automatically. We need the wisdom and commitment to create vibrant Jewish lives for ourselves, our families and for our entire community.

To build a Jewish future is an ongoing challenge and responsibility. It is also an ineffable privilege and a source of infinite delight.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)