

The Merit of Our Ancestors

Shabbat Eikev 5776

August 26, 2016

Rabbi Barry Block

“Don’t destroy the children of Israel,” Moses pleads with God: “Their ancestors were so righteous that You should forgive their descendants simply because of their pedigree.”

This appeal sounds dreadful to the modern ear. We know all too well about people who get away with perfectly awful behavior – crimes, even – because of their parents’ money, influence, and reputation. We do not want to live in a society in which the rich and powerful can get away with murder, while poor people of supposedly lesser lineage are harshly punished for misdemeanors.

And yet, in a little over a month, on Rosh Hashanah, we will ask God forgiveness on account of the very same ancestors invoked by Moses tonight. One portion of our shofar service is called *zichronot*, or remembrances. We petition God to hear the blasts and remember the righteousness of our ancestors – Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel. If we do not deserve atonement on the High Holy Days, we beg God to forgive us because of their merit.

Torah, even in the Ten Commandments, declares that God punishes sinners’ descendants to the third and fourth generation. On the other hand, we are told that God bestows favor to the thousandth generation of those who love God. As unjust as it sounds to punish people for the sins of their parents and grandparents, we may be heartened by the grace that contradicts that decree. After all, everybody has righteous ancestors somewhere in the last thousand generations!

Still, the question nags at us: Do folks deserve special treatment, from God or from the rest of us, because of the goodness of their parents or grandparents?

The concern is relevant in our congregation. A couple weeks ago, on the long drive back from a Florida beach vacation, Robert and Daniel peppered me with questions about who is related to whom. They shared with me their impression that virtually everybody is part of one huge Arkansas Jewish family – except for us, of course. I might have explained that even we Texans have cousins of cousins, at least by marriage, in the congregation.

Robert and Daniel were as wrong as they were correct. Our congregation does include members whose ancestors stretch back at Congregation B'nai Israel to its founding. We treasure in our midst individuals whose parents and grandparents served our community with the greatest distinction, building and maintaining this sacred Temple. Equally, we value members who moved here from other communities, whose labors and spirit make our congregation what it is today. Just as important, a growing percentage of our members did not have Jewish parents at all, be they faithful Jews today or non-Jews contributing substantively to our Jewish future in Central Arkansas and beyond it. We may even have some wonderful, productive members who make tremendous contributions to our community despite the painful reality that their parents were scoundrels.

Just last night, a new year of Judaism 101 classes began. The library was full with adults eager to learn about Judaism, many of them considering conversion. Some of those conversion candidates came to us after learning that they had Jewish ancestors. They are warmly welcomed. At the same time, they quickly learn that they require conversion if they wish to be Jewish, unless they had two Jewish parents, or one Jewish parent and were raised exclusively as Jews. Having some ancestors who happen to have been Jewish may offer a meaningful connection. It does not confer special privilege or status.

I was blessed to grow up in a congregation where my family was highly regarded. I frequently heard what a great man my maternal grandfather was. That made me feel good, particularly after he died young, when I was in elementary school. At the same time, my treatment there sometimes made me uncomfortable. From time to time, I heard accusation of special favors because some of my friends and I came from "big families in the Temple." When my closest childhood friend and I were among the small number selected to speak at Confirmation, was that because of our own efforts or because of who our parents and especially our grandparents were?

That issue does not arise in Confirmation at Congregation B'nai Israel. Everybody gets to speak! However, the "merit of the ancestors" does come up, if in a very different way.

We begin each Confirmation year by joining Temple volunteers at Our House, the Central Arkansas shelter for our community's working homeless individuals and families. After we prepare and serve dinner, the class and I retreat to Fantastic China, where we converse over dinner. I ask about the causes of

homelessness. Members of the class understand that mental illness, devastating medical bills, or other circumstances beyond a person's control could lead to homelessness. They also know that some are there because of past substance abuse, which our students understand to be both a personal failure and an illness, to which many are predisposed by their parents' addictions. Our teens often have the impression that sloth or lack of fiscal responsibility are the primary causes of poverty. While I don't doubt or dispute that those factors may be at play, I ultimately ask the teens if they imagine that they could end up being homeless. Typically, they cannot. The reason? The merit of their ancestors.

Our teens are blessed. While they come from economically diverse households, all of their homes share a foundation of loving support. Their parents are employed. They have health insurance. They visit the doctor and the dentist regularly. They are privileged to view orthodonture as a misfortune. Their parents value education. They attend fine schools, often driving past substandard public schools to get to their better ones. They envision going to college. Yes, their parents expect them to be self-supporting adults. Still, all know they could rely on their loving families if they fell on hard times.

In January, our Confirmation class plans to attend the *L'taken* Social Justice Seminar at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington, D.C. Throughout the fall and then in D.C., they will learn what Judaism teaches about poverty and equal rights, war and peace, violence and criminal justice. Then, at the end of the Seminar, on Monday, we will take to Capitol Hill, where our teens will speak with our elected representatives and their aides about topics of our young people's choosing. Often, our Confirmation classes have chosen to speak on topics to which they relate because they understand the privilege they have that others lack. I recall, for example, the public school students who lobbied about hunger after seeing how many of their classmates went hungry, even after receiving their free or subsidized school breakfast and lunch.

Our young people's greatest advantage in life is being born into families in which they do not have to wonder where they will get their next meal, their shelter, their education, or their medical care. Even the least privileged among them, at lower middle income, are richly blessed. They enjoy even greater advantage, and so do we, when we recognize our good fortune and take up the responsibility it confers upon us.

As we reflect on our own parents and grandparents, some among us are tormented by painful memories of abuse and neglect, cruelty and addiction.

Hopefully, though, each of us also cherishes the memory of at least one ancestor, perhaps now gone from this world, who exhibited wonderful traits that we wish we possessed. *Gates of Prayer* put this sentiment beautifully: “May the nobility in their lives and the high ideals they cherished endure in our thoughts and live on in our deeds.” Our ancestors and their merit can truly live, even if they have died, if we will carry the goodness of their lives into our own. The privilege bestowed upon us by the families into which we were born or adopted will truly be ours if we turn that good fortune into responsibility to build a better future for all.

Perhaps, too, when we fall short, like our ancestors following Moses in the wilderness, God will recall our loved ones’ goodness, and forgive us on their account.

Amen.