

An essay for our generation

Eve of Rosh Hashanah #1 5783/2022

Let me start with a short story. Menachem Mendel Morgensztern was born into a non-hasidic family near Lublin, Poland in 1787. In his youth, he became attracted to the hasidic philosophy and later on became a prominent hasidic rebbe himself. As every rebbe, he needed a city to be his "headquarters" so he started searching for a city to establish in different small towns and villages throughout Poland but he didn't find a place to settle. At the end he arrived in the city of Kotzk, a very anti-hasidic town where he was greeted... with stones. Immediately he said "it's here. This is an excellent omen, at least in this place people are not indifferent."

LeDor vaDor... from generation to generation. Maybe one of the most well-known phrases from our liturgy. At the highest point of the *Amidah*, the prayer we repeat three times a day, at the *Kedushah* (sanctification of the name of God) we say "LeDor vaDor" and we remember our commitment to the generation that precedes us and the one that will come after us. We remember at that moment that we are part of an **eternal chain**... *Nothing starts with us and nothing finishes with us*. Every generation (Dor) is an "in-between". But how do we describe **our** generation? Who are we?

Almost 120 years ago, Rav Itzhak HaKohen Kook wrote a very famous essay entitled "*Dor*" (generation) where he presents what he perceived as the challenges and qualities of his Jewish contemporary generation. In 1906, two years after his Alyah to the Land of Israel, he described in his essay the "clash" of two very different Jewish ways of life: the old yishuv and the new yishuv. The old "traditional" religious Jews and the new, young Zionist secular Jews. The first group spent all their days praying and studying Torah while the second ones spent all their days harvesting the land to create a new Jewish state. This was a "clash of civilizations". And Rav Kook describes how each one of them couldn't understand the other.

Let me present briefly his main arguments about his Dor (generation).

1. **First:** Rav Kook first establishes that there is a change in the generation like never before. There is a contradiction, he says. The new and young generation fades away from the Torah and the Mitzvot but also is much more idealistic than the previous generation. Even as they detach themselves from a Torah observant life, they still pursue highly moral goals. They are more compassionate...
2. **Second:** Paradigms, remedies and answers of the past are not relevant any longer for the new generations. In the previous generation, people fulfilled the Torah because of Ir'ah (fear)... the young generation doesn't work any longer out of fear but out of love. The idea of divine punishment or reward doesn't speak to the new generation. Ideas and dreams are what move this generation...

3. **Third:** The generation must be spoken to with grand ideas. *“The less significant and simpler ideas, although filled with truth and integrity, will not suffice [the generation]”* (pg. 112).
4. **Fourth:** In the past when a Jew abandoned the traditional “Jewish way of life”, it was out of his Yetzer HaRa (his evil inclination). In this generation that is not the case. Jews abandon their traditional Jewish practices not because they want to sin... he says that in his generation the problem is in the Sechel (mind).
5. **Fifth:** In the past, we had greater scholars and pious people... their level of knowledge, wisdom, and piety was greater. But they were just a few, the vast majority of people were brutes. Today the opposite is true. The vast majority of people are learned and have a high moral sensitivity.
6. **Sixth:** And who is responsible for this? The synagogues, the Batei Midrash, the rabbis. Young Jews just don't find answers for their pressing questions in the sermons of their rabbis or in the classes at their Hebrew schools. Is not relevant any longer.

Parents that don't understand their children. New generations that break from their tradition. Old answers that became irrelevant for our own days. Synagogues that become irrelevant... We need to be reminded that this was written in 1906 in the Land of Israel and not in 2022 in Plantation. Apparently this is the trend of Modernity since the end of the XVIII century. Children rebelling against their parents, big ideological changes from generation to generation, a fade in the “traditional” way of life. This was the case in 1810 in Hamburg (Germany), in 1906 in Yaffo (Israel) and in 2022 in Plantation (USA).

Rav Kook was part of that “old generation”. He was ultraorthodox and he remained observant his entire life... but instead of cursing the new secular generation his entire life, he tried to build bridges, to understand them, to make the Torah relevant to their lives. He understood that even though their ways were different from his own, the new generation had very idealistic and moral intuitions. That there were sparks of lights in them: *“We will not rob them [the generation] from all the light and good, all the radiance and intensity it has obtained, but rather increase and shed light upon them, from the light of Life, the light of Truth, illuminating from the Source of Israel's soul. Our sons will behold Him, and glow”* (pg.109).

And he continues: *“To them, we must teach the living Torah, from the Source of Life, ethical ways filled with light and rejoicing, words of pleasantness and good wisdom, refined and purified... from the treasure of Life, of the living Torah.” “We do not desire to suppress them under our feet; we do not wish to place the young and fresh forces which rush forward and uplift, in shackles. Rather, we will illuminate the path before them; we will walk before them in a pillar of fire of Torah and Holy knowledge, and enormous power of the heart”* (pg.115).

Rav Kook instead of saying how terrible this new generation was he was able to see the beauty of the new era: *“Our generation is wonderful... it is extremely difficult to find an example [similar to it] in all our chronicles. It is composed of various upheavals, darkness and light*

servicing in disorder. It is low and dejected, but also lofty and exalted. It is completely guilty and [at the same time] completely innocent" (pg. 108). And maybe we can say the same about our Dor, our generation. In our own days we still find darkness together with light. Rav Kook was able to elevate the sparks of good and see the good in the new Zionist-secular ideology that for many was considered the most outrageous Jewish manifestation. He was also able to see the complexity of the world he was living in. He was able not only to see the light in the darkness but to recognize that darkness and light, good and evil, may coexist together.

We are witnesses of some of the most obscure scenes: war, famine, political and family division, anxiety, loneliness, social media addiction, fewer Jews identifying as Jewish, polarization, extremism, pollution. But on the other hand, we are also witnessing in our own generation some of the most uplifting and shining scenes: advances in science, extended quality of life, entire poor villages receiving electricity or water for the first time, acts of chesed in every corner of the world, people connecting with family members living at some other corner of the world, renovation of Jewish practices and experiences, idealism for a better world in our younger generation.

This is our Dor, our generation. A generation of contradictions. Of light in the midst of darkness and darkness in the midst of light. If we read some newspapers we think that the end is near, that everything is in chaos, that the economy will collapse, that wars will increase, that the world will end tomorrow. If we follow other sources of information, we see a world that is improving in every arena: more democracies in the world, more rights for minorities, less poverty, more integrating technologies. So who is right? How would you describe our generation? A magnificent generation or a generation in decline?

I would like to take each one of the Sermons during this High Holidays to deal with "the great issues" of our generation, not to find solutions because I'm not an expert, but to share with you some ideas from our Jewish wisdom in order to think how can we address them and also to enlighten us with hope. We are the people of hope. Jews invented hope. We called hope "the Messiah".

- Every other culture in the ancient world believed either in a cyclical world that all the times repeated itself or in some kind of Armageddon where at the end, all humanity will be doomed.
- Modernity brought another idea of time: a line that always moved forward, from barbarism to civilization.
- The Jewish people have another approach to time. Like the Challah on Rosh Hashanah, the Challah Agulah. Time is not linear nor cyclical but rather an ascending spiral. We always come back to a similar place but a step higher. The world may seem to move in a circle but is always a little bit higher (with some bumps on the way).

Our ancestors, our Torah, talks about redemption, talks about the messianic future. It doesn't matter how we describe our generation, we don't have to lose faith in humanity, in God and in ourselves. We are not only the people of the book, but we are also the people of hope. Like Shimon Peres would say: *"Optimists and pessimists die the same way. They just live differently. I prefer to live as an optimist."*

I personally would like to say that we live in the best moment in history. That we are the luckiest generation. And that we are in the best moment in our Jewish history. *Ashreinu Ma Tov Chelkeinu*. But still, there are challenges. Still there are bumps in the road. In the upcoming days, with humility and self-awareness of my own limitations, I would like to share some of these challenges and drink from the water of our ancient tradition to learn how to overcome them or maybe just to learn how to live with them: Polarization, loss of trust, anxiety, loneliness, social media addiction, incapacity to forgive, sense of lack of meaning in our life in general and our Jewish life in particular.

According to Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, that was also the great novelty in the words of Rabbi Kook, that despite the darkening shadows of his generation, he saw the point of truth and goodness in each movement, in each ideology, and determined it to be the main point. He taught us to appreciate all of these movements, and called us to delve into the Torah in greatness, to draw from its enlightenment to all the forces revealed in the generation, in order to guide and elevate them for the tikun of the world and its redemption.

There is dark in the world, but there is also light. And we need to focus on that light to make it bigger. The more we focus on the dark sides, the darker the world will become. Only if we focus on the good, in the light that there still is in the darkest places, we would be able to bring more light to the world. In this regard, there is a beautiful story of Rabbi Levi Itzchak of Berditchev (1740-1809) that he always wanted to look for the good in every person. He was able to see the good sparks in everyone. He once saw a Jew adorned with his prayer shawl and tefillin as he was greasing the wheels of his wagon. Someone remarked, "Look at that fool. He dresses in piety while he dirties himself with work." Rabbi Levi Yitzchok responded: "Look at that holy person. Even while greasing his wagon he is wearing his prayer shawl and tefillin." This is the task of the leaders of this generation: to elevate the sparks.

What the Rav Kook does on a national level, talking about finding the good in every movement, in any ideology, Rebbe Nachman of Braslav invites us to do it with the individual people around us that we consider wicked (Rasha). This is his invitation: *"Even in the case of someone who is completely wicked, it is necessary to search and find in him some modicum of good; the portion in that little bit he is not wicked. And by finding in him a modicum of good and judging him favorably, one genuinely elevates him to the scale of merit and can bring him to repent..."* (Likutei Moharan 282:1) In our interpersonal relationships this year we could take this advice from Rebbe Nachman: to try to focus on the good side of people surrounding us and from there build a new relationship.

This is what we ought to do in our generation, in our Dor, too. We should be guided under the wings of giants like Kedushat Levi, Rebbe Nachman of Braslav and Rav Kook in order to see the sparks of light in every person, in every political ideology, in every Jewish movement. As Rav Kook taught us: *"The purest righteous do not complain about evil; rather, they increase justice. They do not complain about godlessness, but increase faith. They do not complain about ignorance, but increase wisdom."*

So this is the task. My invitation.

- In a national level, it doesn't matter who you voted in the last elections, think about the opposite political party and try to think one good program, value, idea they promote.
- In a Jewish level, we are liberal and progressive Jews, try to think outside the reform movement, something that you cherish and respect from this other movements.
- On a personal level, think about one person in your circle that you are not specially fond of, someone you don't like too much, think of one good virtue of this person, one good deed they did that you can recognize.

And when you are able to identify it, try to build a new relationship with them, at least in your minds. Try to elevate their light instead of pointing to their dark sides.

This 5783 is not a year to complain about the darkness, but a year to bring more light. Let's do it together.

Shanah Tovah uMetukah!
Rabbi Uri