



Stop Looking Down!

Rabbi Daniel Green, Rosh Hashana 5778

A Gift from the World's Wealthiest Man

The world's richest Jew may have pledged to give the vast majority of his wealth to charity, but his great-grandfather's Kiddush cup is staying in the family. This past week, Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, posted a picture of his two year old daughter holding a Kiddush cup. The cup was an heirloom piece bought over a century ago by her namesake and great, great grandfather, Max Zuckerberg. In the post, little Max is holding up the cup surrounded by pictures of beautiful Challas and Shabbat candles.

Just a few short years ago, Mark married Priscila Chan in a secular ceremony and declared to the world that he was an avowed atheist. This past year, when speaking at his alma mater, Harvard University, he disclosed that he had reconsidered. Mark now realizes the importance of faith and traditions. In his words: "Now I believe religion is very important."

Becoming a parent can be a life changing experience - even when you're worth 70 billion dollars.

Rosh Hashana is a day that we think about our legacy. What heritage heirloom will we bestow to the next generation? It's no coincidence that the themes of every single Torah portions on Rosh Hashana deal with parenthood. From the birth of the first Jewish child, Yitzchak, to the struggles of his upbringing, to the birth of Samuel born to a barren mother. Rosh Hashana is day where we evaluate our commitment to the next generation. Are we proper role models? Are we transmitting a Jewish heirloom? Are we a solid link in that eternal chain?

The Google Generation

Modern Parenting has challenges that Max Zuckerberg couldn't have possibly imagined a hundred years ago. Developmental Psychologist, Gordon Neufeld, describes how we are living through a tectonic shift that has cast parents out of their natural orbit. Historically parents were purveyors of knowledge. They were a child's prime source of information. They could often control when, and where, vital knowledge was shared.

Not too long ago, parents were an authority. Whether they actually knew the answer, or bluffed their way through, it didn't matter. Children had a sense of trust in their parents and deep connections were forged at the dinner table and on the living room sofa. In the information age, if a question is even asked chances are it's "fact checked" before the answer is even finished. Google has supplanted parents as the new purveyor of knowledge. In the technological age a cycle has been created. Children are turning less and less to parents and, in turn, parents are often in retreat. But more important than information is meaning and identity - in these realms parents, not pixels, are still the specialists.

The Torah clearly states that parents must be the primary teachers of their children. Why is that? Education can, and often should, be outsourced. In fact, most parents are unqualified to be teachers! Yet, education is much more than knowledge. Children desperately need parents to spark their imagination and to forge their identity, to provide a sense of security and to build their esteem, to nurture their emotional stability and to inculcate values. In contemporary society, these needs are more acute than ever before.

Shared Vision

On Rosh Hashana we read about a father, one hundred years older than his son, who successfully bridges the generational divide. We meditate on the relationship of Abraham with his son Isaac. Despite the age differential, the gap between the two was nonexistent. When asked to pay the ultimate sacrifice, Abraham and Isaac walk in harmony bonded together by a shared vision.

As they approach the mountain from a distance, Abraham sees a glorious vision of God's presence hovering above the peak. While the others with him are oblivious to the magnificence of the moment and see only a nondescript mountain. Abraham then turns to Isaac and he too sees the presence of God. Leaving the others behind, Abraham and Isaac proceed alone. "Veyelchu shneihem yachdav" - "and the two walked forward as one."

This imagery resonates particularly well in our modern times. We are distracted on countless fronts and are oblivious to the glorious moments around us. How often do we pause and truly share uninterrupted moments together? Yet, our children seek our attention and desperately want to know our vision for life. We may thrive as providers, protectors... and chauffeurs, but all too often fail as nurturers.

Is Anyone Listening?

Cheryl Turkel, an MIT psychologist, specializing in the field of human relationships with technology, describes how 40% of students entering college are unable to properly empathize with others.

What happened? Our children run to us at the earliest of ages to share their inner dreams and aspirations but their searching eyes fail to find ours. We are distracted and give divided attention at best. Over time, the eyes stop searching altogether, and our traditional position as parent, a grandparent, slips away.

According to Turkel, we need to look up. In a recent study, participants were asked: In your most recent conversation, did you stop to check your phone. What percentage of individuals do you think admitted to checking their cellphone in their most recent conversation? The answer - 89%! 89% admitted to doing it! When asked whether that negatively impacted their interaction, 82% acknowledged that it made it worse. We know it's wrong. We know it's rude. Yet, somehow we can't stop and we are paying the price.

According to studies, even when you don't actually use your phone, simply by placing it on the table between you and someone else – it creates a disconnect. By merely exposing your cellphone, people respond with less authenticity, less vulnerability and less openness and instinctively talk about trivial things. Why? Because when you place your phone on the table, you're placing the other person on notice. See that phone... it may be silent now but at any moment, it may make a sound, and if it does, chances are, you'll get bumped.

Our children understand the symbolic power of our phone, whether it's in our hand, in our pocket, or on the table. They understand how it's competing against them. As a result, they share less, they connect less, they seek out their parents less. Why? Because at any moment they too may get bumped.

The Great Russian Zaideh

In 1989, Gorbachev introduced Glasnost to the Soviet Union and symbolically invited an international delegation of rabbis to visit Moscow. Among them was Rabbi Yisrael Mayer Lau, former Chief Rabbi of Israel.

On his last night in the Great synagogue of Moscow, an old man named Berel asked the Rabbi whether he could escort him to his hotel. Rabbi Lau agreed. The walk was about a half an hour. Reb Berel began to cry. *"You come here, you teach, you sing with us, you celebrate Shabbat with us, you lift us up so high, and then you leave. You go home and we're here alone, back in the pit of despair again."*

Rabbi Lau had an idea. *"Reb Berel, how old are you?" - "I'm 86 years old," he replied. "Reb Berel, the Russians won't care if you leave. I made some connections here. Let me work on it tonight and tomorrow you will join me on the flight back to Eretz Yisrael, to Israel. You'll be out of the pit for good."*

The old man let out a heartfelt sigh: *"Oh to see Yerushalayim; to touch the Western Wall; to breathe the air of our homeland. It is a dream come true. What I wouldn't do to kiss the land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.* And then Berel stopped short, and continued:

"But how much can a person think only of himself? I have one daughter and she married out, a Russian gentile. They don't live near Moscow. She has two children. Two young Jewish boys. One is nine years old and the other one is seven years old. They are my grandchildren, my Eineklach.

Once a month my daughter brings my grandchildren to visit their Zaideh. That day is so dear to me. I get dressed up in my Shabbat clothes and I place one grandson on one knee, the second grandson on the other knee. I say with them "Shema Yisrael." I teach them about Moshe Rabbeinu. I teach them about Shabbos, about Rosh Hashanah, about Pesach. I teach them who they are. I share with them our story, a story that began thousands of years ago and is still going strong.

"Those two hours a month are the only two hours of Judaism they get and those two hours are the most precious two hours of my entire month. If I leave with you to Israel, who will tell them that they are Jewish? Who will see to it that the chain continues? Who will teach them to be proud to be a Jew?"

Somewhere in the world today, there are two brothers, one 37 and one 35, who knew a Zaideh. Brothers that know they are part of a chain, because their Zaideh was willing to stop everything in life, focus exclusively on them, and transmit a message. This Zaideh didn't look down. This Zaideh heard the cry of Samuel and this Zaideh never bumped his Eineklach.*

For many of us we think the boat has left the harbour. "Our kids are already teenagers!" "They're already adults!" "They're married!" "It's too late!"

Grandchildren? "The job of a grandparent is to smile." "Never say anything!" In truth, parenting changes over times but only the tactic. We always need to be role model. We always need to be communicating a message.

Who will be the Zaidy's?

Whether we are aware of it or not there are eyes in this world that are looking in our direction. There are hearts that are waiting for us to share our message. Within each and every one of us, there is a message to be shared. At times, we may be oblivious of its content. We may be unable to articulate the words or we simply may feel that there are no ears open to even listen. It's not easy but we need to find our message.

Berel held his grandchildren on his lap and chanted the Shema in Moscow. Max Zuckerberg raised a Kiddush cup on the shores of a new world. Each created an image of their Judaism that was transmitted to future generations.

What is our Jewish image? How do our children and grandchildren, nephews and nieces, look at us? What is our Jewish legacy? In Judaism, faith was never personal. We cannot abdicate our positions. It is time for all of us to immerse more deeply and more meaningfully in our faith and our community. We must refuse to look down and we certainly cannot look away. May we all be strong links in that eternal Jewish chain! May we all find our Jewish heirloom!

**Acknowledgment to Rabbi YY Jacobson for the wonderful story of Berel.*