

A People of Three-Thousand Years

By Lazer Gurkow

Broken Telephone

Have you ever played broken telephone? This game consists of passing a message to one person, who in turn passes it to another. The object is to see how many transmissions the message can undergo before it is altered. In most cases five transmissions is considered a high number.

Does it not surprise you that we, the Jewish people, have successfully transmitted our passion for Judaism for hundreds of generations and thousands of years? Sometimes the flame of passion seems to flicker or even die down, but it always rebounds as if from nowhere. We are heirs to Abraham and Sarah from whom we inherited our love of G-d and commitment to His will. How has it survived intact for so long without alteration, let alone truncation?

Become Your Parents

The key to this question lies in the distinction between an inheritance and a gift. Suppose you were gifted a horse, which you politely declined. To whom would the horse belong? To the gifter, of course. Now suppose you were set to inherit a horse, but you declined the inheritance, to whom would the horse belong in this case? In Torah law, the answer is, you.

Torah quite simply does not allow heirs to refuse an inheritance. A gift is a transfer of ownership and as such requires the consent of both the gifter and the giftee. Inheritance is not a transfer of ownership; it is a replacement of personhood. Heirs inherit by virtue of becoming their testator. Put differently, when passing on, the testator doesn't transfer possessions to the heir. The possessions remain in place, but the heir succeeds the testator to ownership. The heir replaces or takes the place of the testator.

This is a parent's highest achievement. Throughout life we toil to instill our values in our children, imbue them with our love for life, and invest them with our passion, integrity and ethic. As we pass on, we don't simply leave them with a final set of wishes, we leave them ourselves. They become us and with that our highest wish is granted. Our highest aspirations are achieved.

This is why the Hebrew word for inheritance is *nachalah*, which shares etymological roots with *nachal*, the Hebrew word for river. An estate passes from testator to heir as naturally as water flows downriver. The heir's consent need not be sought nor acquired for the flow to activate. The flow is a natural outgrowth of the relationship.

From Abraham

We now return to our question about the broken telephone. The reason the Jewish soul is still aflame with a passion for G-d, aglow with the splendor of His majesty and awed by His royal grandeur is not that we inherited it from our parents, who inherited it from their parents, who inherited it from another generation tracing back three thousand years. This is not about a chain with hundreds of links. No, it is about our direct bond with the original links, Abraham and Sarah.

If the child becomes the father then Isaac became the Abraham of his generation after his father, Abraham, passed away. When Isaac passed away, his son, Jacob, became the Isaac of his time, but, because Isaac, in his day, had become Abraham, Jacob therefore became not only the Isaac of his time, but also the Abraham of his time.

And so it goes. Every generation replaces and becomes not only the generation that immediately precedes it, but all the generations that fold back from that point till Abraham, the original link. We succeed our forebearers and because they succeeded theirs – we become them. We are not only the bearers of a three thousand year tradition– we are the first link on its chain. Our soul has succeeded the original soul of Abraham.

The Convert

This concept becomes all the more cogent in application to the convert. Jews from birth identify Jewishly as children of their biological parents. Jews by choice are not born to Jewish parents and identify Jewishly as children of Abraham and Sarah. Though we are all spiritually linked to Abraham and Sarah, this link is most readily perceived in the convert.

The Jewish soul assigned to the convert upon conversion is of the highest spiritual order, linked directly and intrinsically to Abraham. Rather than sitting on the introductory rung of the spiritual ladder, the convert, as the direct heir of Abraham, sits at its apex. Some of the greatest of Jewish teachers were either themselves converts as was Onkelos the Proselyte, who translated the Torah into Aramaic, or were children of converts as was Rabbi Akiva.

To be in the presence of a righteous convert is to bask in the glow and soulfulness of Abraham and Sarah. It awakens our own connection to the Patriarch and inspires our own souls.

Heirs of the Divine

If we continue to unravel the thread of inheritance we arrive at a startling conclusion. The Torah describes itself as an inheritance from G-d. This implies that Jews are not only heirs to Abraham, but also to G-d. It makes sense to think of an heir replacing a parent, but how can we become G-d?

Perhaps the best way to answer this question is the way my father once answered it when I asked it of him. I could not have been much older than five when I overheard my father saying that G-d is in everything. The stone is G-d, the tree is G-d even the person is G-d. I interrupted him and asked with wonder, is that really true, am I G-d? ‘No,’ he replied, “you are not G-d, G-d is you.”

If G-d is infinite then it follows that He fills all space. If He fills all space then it follows that there is no space for anything outside of G-d. If this is true then it follows that everything in existence is an extension of G-d. This means that we exist by virtue of His existence. When we come to realize this existential truth we suspend our ego and transcend our very sense of self. We are sublimated and absorbed by the overarching and all consuming presence of the Divine.

Rather than becoming a lesser self we become larger; so large as to become part and parcel of the Divine. This is the truest form of inheritance. It is not that we become G-d, rather it is that we realize that we never were anything, but G-d. The Torah is our inheritance because it teaches us how to let go of being an outsider. It shows how to empty our souls of our very selves. It directs us to shed our ego and invites us to become a part of G-d.

Sources:

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