

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 2017 5778

The last 20 years has seen a revolution in genetics research, with the chief accomplishment being the sequencing of the human genome. This advance has brought on a host of genetic tests that trace one's ancestry. You have seen the ads on TV: for Ancestry.com, 23andMe, and other companies, in which people who thought they were Italian discover they are actually Scottish or German, and suddenly, we see them in the next scene wearing kilts or lederhosen. The Harvard Professor, Louis Gates, Jr., has a wonderful show on PBS called Finding Your Roots, where he walks through with famous people various documentary research showing the stories of their ancestors. I was especially moved by one episode which described to Dustin Hoffman how his grandparents and great-grandparents came to America through Ellis Island after fleeing pogroms and oppression in Eastern Europe- a story shared by many of us here. You could see all of this sinking in at both the intellectual and emotional level, and after the piece-de-resistance, the genetic marker test showed that, indeed, he is 98% Ashkenazi, he wiped away the tears and said, "I am Dustin Hoffman, and I am a Jew, I am a Jew!"

I belong to several Jewish-themed discussion groups on Facebook, and this genetic validation has become so popular that a recent

discussion thread focused not just on the finding that they were Ashkenazic Jews, but on what the small, “other” percentages were for people. Some showed 5% Northern African- possibly relating to Sephardic relatives, whereas others cited 3% Asian or 4% Nordic, or 5% African. Of course, you know my irreverent sense of humor; I wrote “4% raped by Cossacks”.

But what is fueling this need for people to know their legacy, for people to know where they fit in? What does discovering this legacy mean? And more importantly, what are one’s links to the past and responsibilities to the future?

For Jews, when we need to “go to the videotape”, we go back to the Torah. And for Jews, legacy in the Torah is the “Brit”, the covenant with G-d.

In fact, if there is one major leitmotif in the Torah, it is the constant reiteration by G-d with succeeding generations of G-d’s enduring covenant. G-d makes a brit with Noah to never again wipe out humanity with a flood; there is a brit with Abraham that promises a special bond and a holy land for ALL of Abraham’s future generations- a covenant that literally is signified by the circumcision ritual we call the “brit”.

And in the Torah *parsha* we read just last week, there is a clear description of who is included in the brit and what are our obligations.

ט אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם בְּלִפְנֵי יְהוָה
 אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: רָאשֵׁיכֶם שְׂבֻטֵיכֶם, זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשֹׁטְרֵיכֶם,
 כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל.
9 All you who are standing this day before the LORD your
 God: your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers,
 even all the men of Israel,

י טַפְּכֶם נְשֵׁיכֶם--וְגֵרָה, אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ
 מִחֲדָרֵי הָעֵץ: מִחֲטֹב עֲצֵי הָעֵץ, עַד שֹׂאֵב מִיַּיְדֵךָ.
10 your little ones, your wives, and the foreigner (Gentile)
 that is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your
 wood unto the drawer of your water;

יא לְעָבְדָהּ, בְּבְרִית יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ--וּבְאֵלֹתָיו: אֲשֶׁר
 יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ, כָּרַת עִמָּךְ הַיּוֹם.
11 that you should enter into the covenant of the LORD your
 God--and into God's oath--which the LORD your God makes
 with you this day;

יב לְמַעַן הַקִּים-אֶתֵּךְ הַיּוֹם לֹו לְעַם, וְהוּא יְהִי-
 לְךָ לֵאלֹהִים--כַּאֲשֶׁר, דִּבַּר-לְךָ; וְכַאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע
 לְאַבְרָהָם, לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב.
12 that God may establish for you this day, unto God, for a
 people, and that God may be for you a Lord, as God spoke to
 you, and as God swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac,
 and to Jacob.

יג וְלֹא אֶתְכֶם, לְבַדְכֶם--אֲנֹכִי, כָּרַת אֶת-הַבְּרִית
 הַזֹּאת, וְאֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים, הַזֹּאת.
13 Not only with you do I make this covenant and this oath;

יד כִּי אֶת-אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁנֹו פֹה, עִמָּנוּ עַמְד הַיּוֹם, לְפָנַי,
 יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ; וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר אֵינְנוּ פֹה, עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם.
14 but with all that stand here with us this day before the
 LORD our God, and also with him that is not here with us this
 day--

The covenant as Jews to G-d links us to our past and obligates us to our future. It is not just for men, but for women, it is not just for the old, but for the young. It is not just for the Jew, it is for the Gentile who enters our community. I will save this for another sermon, but it is clear that this statement alone expands the notion of the brit to include Gentiles who have entered by conversion or intermarriage.

But what is our obligation in this Brit? Is it somehow automatic, something we simply inherit just by being born or Jew? What is our obligation, and more than that, what is our obligation to our past generations- our legacy, and what are our obligations to our future generations.

In the same Torah parsha, there is a short sentence that both describes our obligations AND makes a connection to Rosh Hashanah as a time to reflect on these obligations.

כח הַסֵּתֵרִים לַיהוָה, אֲלֵהֵינוּ; וְהַגְּלוֹת לָנוּ וּלְבָנֵינוּ, עַד-עוֹלָם--לְעֹשׂוֹת, אֶת-כָּל-דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת. 28 The secret things belong unto the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever, that we may do, all the words of this law.

What are הַסֵּתֵרִים, what are these “secret things”? Our tradition states that these are the mystical revelations that G-d shared with the angels, which the Jewish mystics such as the Kabbalists sought to discover through rituals of meditations and intense prayer. These are hard to describe, but we and so many religions and societies seem to know they exist since we seem to be searching for them incessantly, creating Burning Man festivals to connect with their truths.

And what are וְהַגְּלוֹת, the “revealed truths”? These are traditionally thought of as the revealed Torah at Sinai- Jewish Law and Jewish ritual, discussed down the generations from the Mishna to the

Talmud, and then to the minutia by generations of rabbinical scholars. What the Torah ask of our obligation: לַעֲשׂוֹת, “to do”. But then it adds: הַזֵּאת הַתּוֹרָה דְּבָרֵי-כָל-אֶת, “all the words of this Torah”. It doesn’t say how to do this, how intensely to do this, how often to do this- just, as Nike would say “do it.”

This motif, וְהִנְגַּלְתָּ הַנְּסֻתָּרֹת, is central to the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, as if to remind us that this is the season to review for ourselves where we, as individual Jews, fit in to our legacy- not just for the past, but for the present and the future.

On the High Holidays, we literally refer back to this part of the Torah, this reminder of our brit, with the paragraph: וְהִנְגַּלְתָּ הַנְּסֻתָּרֹת, “What can we say before you, God sublime, who knows all, the hidden and the revealed.”

We then read what I consider the most central and important paragraph in the High Holiday liturgy:

What are we? What are our lives? What is our loving-kindness? What is our righteousness? What is our salvation? What is our strength? What is our might? What shall we say before You, Lord our G-d and G-d of our ancestors? Are not all the mighty as nothing

before You, the men of renown as if they had never been, the wise as if they know nothing, and the understanding as if they lack intelligence? For their many works are in vain, and the days of their lives like a fleeting breath before You. The pre-eminence of man over the animals is nothing, for all is but a fleeting breath.

Friends, here is the message of why we come to shul on the HH: it is our way of connecting to our legacy, to our past. But if we thought that this is enough, that it is enough to do what have made our Bubbies and Zaydies proud, that's not enough. We also need to think about today- how are we bringing our legacy, our sense of purpose as Jews, our humanity and legacy of learning, morality and tzedakah, into today's world? And that still is not enough, because as the Torah describes in the brit: these obligations are for ALL generations to come. We must think about how each of us ensures that our future generations can enter into the brit. It is a lofty and onerous obligation, to say the least. But it is nonetheless out part of the bargain, our payback for all the beauty and wonderment we have been given in the past year by G-d as part of G-d's obligation. This season, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, let us take the time to think about where we fit in, and how we can help continue our legacy for today and tomorrow.

Let us be able to ask the question: what's in your DNA?