

Good Shabbos Everyone. In this week's parsha Chayei Sorah, we read about the deaths of Avrohom and Sorah, who were the father and mother of the Jewish people. The Rabbis tell us: "The deeds of fathers are an example for the children." Because we are all children of Avrohom and Sorah, we can learn from their actions.

One of the ways that Avrohom and Sorah distinguished themselves is in the decision they took to go against the cherished ideals of society and to build their own lives based on a belief in the One G-d. For this reason is Avrohom referred to in the Torah as "Ha'Ivri" - "The Hebrew". Rashi explains that the word "Ivri" is related to the root of the word meaning "on the other side."

It is as if Avrohom put himself on the other side of world opinion. The whole world at the time worshipped idols. Yet Avrohom believed in the One G-d. That is why we, the children of Avrohom, are called Hebrews, because we follow in the footsteps of a man who set himself apart from the entire world. Avrohom was not intimidated by the fact that he held a minority opinion. So too can we be inspired by the example of our forefathers and mothers who made the decision to worship Hashem against the popular view at the time. Let us not read an inspirational story, told in the first person by Reb Mishulem Laib Drapkin.

"I always felt a connection to Judaism because of my grandfather. We often spent the Jewish holidays with my grandparents and were always greeted by the warmth of my grandmother's cooking, and my grandfather's sure, but soft handshake with a hearty "Gut Yontiff!" I didn't really know what "Gut Yontiff" meant, but I knew that we always greeted each other with it at happy times.

Often when we came to visit on Sundays, my grandfather took us kids to a small amusement park. He bought us tickets for the rides, watching us scream with delight. He got such pleasure from his grandchildren. He even went on the Ferris wheel with us, his arm wrapped protectively behind us as the car soared up into the sky.

One Rosh Hashanah, I asked my mother where my grandfather was. She said he was at services all day. I asked why, and she replied, "He goes to an Orthodox synagogue. They pray all day." I imagined my grandfather in a synagogue full of other grandfathers, all wearing dark suits and yarmulkes. I thought to myself that if my grandfather went there, it must be serious Judaism!

When I was older, I attended Hebrew School at our local Conservative Synagogue. I didn't much care for it. It cut into my after-public school play time. Like many children of my time, I couldn't see the relevance of Hebrew School when none of what we studied was practiced in our "regular" lives.

Although my experiences seemed to be pushing me farther from Judaism, there was one notable exception: my Bar Mitzvah. I enjoyed learning how to read my Torah portion. My tutor, an elderly Orthodox rabbi teaching at our synagogue, really inspired me. I also immensely enjoyed the singing and chanting. My Bar Mitzvah was an unqualified success. I was proud of what I did, and was gratified when my mother said, "I wish that your grandfather was still alive to see your Bar Mitzvah. He would have been so proud of you."

By the time I went away to college, I had little or nothing to do with Judaism. The fact that I was living far away from family and friends and the heritage I grew up with didn't bother me most of the time, except during the December holidays. Then, I became intensely aware of being a minority in a country where someone else's religion is assumed to be part of everyone's heritage. My Jewish identity remained at an ebb for many years until a close family friend became a "Baal Teshuvah" and an orthodox Rabbi to boot.

When his mother passed away, some local Chassidim volunteered to help with the necessary arrangements. After the funeral, I chanced to talk to the baal teshuva - Orthodox rabbi, who to my great surprise was a really nice guy! He in turn, gave me the number of my local orthodox rabbi who also turned out to be really terrific. He was my age, with a background like mine, and was not only observant, but seemingly fulfilled and happy with his world and existence.

My preconceptions about Judaism were blown away. What an amazing world I had discovered, where people actually lived what they learned. I was overwhelmed by the vast storehouse of knowledge that I had not only discovered, but belonged to me by birthright! I began to study more about Judaism, and one Sunday, my new found friend from the orthodox shul announced a class called "Lox, Bagels, Cream Cheese and Tefillin." I eagerly went down to shul with my grandfather's Tefillin which my father had recently given me, only to discover that I was the only one who showed up. We chatted for a while, which helped to calm my jitters about something that seemed so foreign. The rabbi explained the workings of Tefillin, and then told me to get them out. I was completely unprepared for what I found.

I took the Tefillin out, and laid them on top of the bag. I was struck by how carefully and lovingly they had been wrapped. Although they were last touched by my grandfather over 25 years ago, it was as though I was seeing his hands carefully wrapping them and holding them right in front of me. This conscious act of his had transcended the decades since he had last used them. The memories of my grandfather came back in a flood, and when I had his Tefillin wrapped around me, I felt myself surrounded by his love, strength, and kindness.

Later, I related the story to my wife and wept. On the High Holy Days this past year when I was praying, I remembered the image of my grandfather going off to daven in his synagogue on Rosh Hashanah. This was the first time that I was attending observant services in their entirety, from beginning to end! In a moment of reflection, I wished that I could be next to my grandfather, together, chanting the prayers that were such a natural part of his life. He would see them becoming a part of my own life, and I know that he would have beamed with pride.

Recently, I told one of my new, observant friends that my Tefillin were my grandfather's. I told him the story of how they hadn't been used for over twenty five years, and when my local orthodox rabbi had them checked that they were still "kosher." With a twinkle in his eye he said, "You know, your grandfather knows that you are wearing them." Shrugging his shoulders he concluded, "Don't ask me how, but he knows." **Good Shabbos Everyone.**

In memory of Shusha Malka bas R' Avrohom ה"ב

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