Shavuot: Looking Forward and Backward

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Human progress is always cumulative. Every generation builds upon the accomplishments of the past and advances the human condition. By definition, each generation enjoys an improved state of affairs over previous ones.

However, progress and modernity also foster arrogance. We haughtily look back at the past as primitive and backward, while reveling in our modern successes. This smug tendency, often referred to as modernism or generationism haunts every generation. Some generations though, are more vulnerable to this disease than others, and our culture is particularly susceptible to this cultural counterfeit.

Over the past four hundred years we have experienced dizzying progress in almost every sector of the human condition. Our political systems are more democratic, our economies more unrestricted, and our standard of living has been radically improved by industrialization and mechanization. Though every generation surpasses the previous one, our era has benefited from an exponential leap of prosperity, due to the cumulative achievements and radical revolutions of the past four centuries.

Additionally, Darwin cast a hypnotic spell upon our collective imagination, convincing us that everything evolves towards a more improved state. If Nature improves through evolution so must human society. This potent combination of democracy, industrialization, technology and Darwinian theory has created a modern form of idolatry. We all worship in the temple of modernity, laughing at our ancient and primitive ancestors.

Irony and Myopia

In this false conceit of generationism there is both irony and myopia. The irony is that we overlook the fact that future generations will judge us exactly the same way we judge previous generations. They will mock our crude energy sources, ridicule our handheld cellphones, laugh at our heavy aluminum airplanes lumbering across the skies, and be shocked that, during Covid-19, we didn’t develop imaging tools capable of scanning for viruses and halting the pandemic in a week.

Generationism isn’t only ironic, it is also myopic. Science and progress, themselves, carry severe and often unseen dangers. Democracy liberalizes politics, but it also blurs moral values. Capitalism unleashes the potential of the individual, but it also generates unequal distribution of wealth and promotes a culture of competition rather than one of compassion. Urbanization pools human resources and improves the quality of life, but it also creates overpopulated concrete jungles, with too many people and vehicles, and not enough oxygen or skyline. Mechanization frees us from menial domestic chores, providing us with endless time to become addicted to mindless entertainment. And now, we stand at a precipice, facing the aftermath of our information revolution. If improperly regulated, Artificial Intelligence can wreck society and scrub human identity. Giddily applauding progress, we are blinded to the latent dangers which quietly approach.

Additionally, though technology and science advance our physical condition, they don’t often improve moral behavior and they rarely enrich the inner world of the human spirit. We may enjoy greater financial and material resources, but are we happier? We communicate with one another more effortlessly, but do we enjoy greater self-esteem? We are more entertained, but do we possess meaning?

Progress is brainwashing us with generationism, feeding a false narrative that the past was flawed while the present is surpassing. We ignore hidden dangers until it is too late, and we become fixated upon the outer world while ignoring the inner world of identity and values.

Modernity and Religion

Religious Jews face an especially delicate challenge. Faith and religion stem from one seminal moment, 3300 years ago, when Hashem spoke directly with us and delivered His immutable Torah. Naturally, with the passing of time, the transmission of Torah became less accurate. Generations closer to that divine broadcast possessed a more accurate *masora*, and also enjoyed access to supernatural *nevu'a*. Therefore, halakha assigns greater authority to those closer to Har Sinai, who better understood the word of Hashem. Those who live downstream from *Matan Torah* defer to those who stood under the mountain, or to those who lived "closer" to the event of *Matan Torah*. Additionally, earlier generations, more immediately exposed to Hashem and His Torah, generally lived lives of superior moral caliber. There were always exceptions and periods of moral decline, but, generally, we look back to previous generations as standard bearers for values, and for moral instruction.

It is extremely challenging to embrace modernity, celebrate its progress and adopt its potential, while still judging the past as religiously and spiritually superior. This complex view of the past can be very confusing. It is easier to completely embrace modernity, perceiving the past as fossilized and irrelevant. It is also easier to completely dismiss or even villainize modernity, while unconditionally affirming the past as the ideal.

The more authentic view is also more nuanced. We are grateful for science and progress, and we exploit its potential, but we look back to Sinai and to past generations for religious teaching and for moral guidance. It is always easier to face in only one direction than it is to face in two directions. It is precisely for this reason that God created necks which swivel, encouraging us to look in two directions.

Life Before 1948

Life in Israel exacerbates this challenge. 1948 was a dramatic shift in Jewish history, as, for the first time in thousands of years, we lived in our homeland rather than being strewn across the planet, hosted by other nations. Finally gifted with Jewish sovereignty, we began to look forward to a bright future of statehood and prosperity. Additionally, frum Jews looked forward to a messianic future which our state heralded. Eyes of Israelis became pinned toward their bright future.

Blinded by the light of the future it is even more tempting to disregard the past. The past of Jewish exile appears helpless and hapless, when held up to the bright horizons of Israel and its future. Some Zionist leaders actively endorsed the historical amputation of the past from the modern narrative. The shameful past of Jewish exile had no place in the bold and brave story of modern Israel.

This bifurcation of Jewish history has created religious quicksand. Religion is predicated upon embracing past traditions and belonging to a *masora* of faith. Sometimes, Zionist euphoria quietly brainwashes us that our past is empty and purposeless. Without valuing the past, it is more difficult to be inspired by the *masora*, or to build a healthy religious identity.

The past two thousand years were painful, but also remarkable. Tenaciously, we maintained religious faith and preserved Jewish identity in the face of hatred, discrimination, and relentless violence. Not only did we survive a hostile world, but, when invited to, we spearheaded culture and progress. We built robust Jewish *kehillot*, weaving a rich tapestry of religion, culture, and community. The impressive courage of past generations is certainly comparable to the fortitude we have displayed in settling and defending our country. They weren’t weak.

This brave and outstanding past propelled our ultimate return to Israel. Jewish history didn’t begin in 1948 and neither did redemption. They have each been brewing for thousands of years. Perhaps we should launch a reverse birthright program: instead of bringing overseas Jews to Israel, we should bring Israelis back to Jewish communities, helping them better appreciate Jewish sacrifice, communal consciousness, and our common historical heritage.

The future is bright, but our past was also magnificent. Israelis must cast their gaze to the future without dismissing the past. Look forward and backward at the same time.