

Shabbat Yitro - Youth Shabbat  
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

Today we celebrate our children on this Youth Shabbat. *Every week would be a fitting time to highlight the fact that our young people can lead us in so many ways by leading services, asking good questions, and bringing enthusiasm and joy to Jewish living. But it is particularly fitting to mark Youth Shabbat on Shabbat Yitro, the day we read the Ten Commandments given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. Because kids and Torah go together like apples and honey.*

Jewish parents who see their young kids receiving their copy of the Torah or Siddur are sometimes moved to tears. Why? This happens at both day schools and our Cohen Religious School. The same is true with parents who watch their kids read Torah for the first time. There's a feeling inside that can't be put into words. I feel this too.

Joy and pride well up within us at a child's school graduation. But at a *Kabbalat HaTorah* or *Kabbalat HaSiddur*, there's a third emotion: assurance that the Jewish traditions will carry forward to the next generation.. That the Jewish people will continue. This emotion, I believe, conjures tears. We also feel it at a Bris/Baby naming, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and wedding. It's no coincidence that some people take out tissues there too.

This week's Torah reading marks the moment when the ancient Israelites received the original Torah in the desert. A wonderful Midrash imagines the following dialogue between the Israelites and G-d at Sinai immediately before Revelation:

*When Israel stood to receive the Torah, the Holy One said to them: "I am prepared to give you My Torah. Present to Me good guarantors that you will observe and study the Torah and I shall give it to you."*

*They said: "Our ancestors are our guarantors."*

*The Holy One said: "Your ancestors are not sufficient guarantors. Bring Me good guarantors, and I shall give you the Torah."*

*They said: "Our prophets are our guarantors."*

*The Holy One said: "The prophets are not sufficient guarantors. Bring Me good guarantors and I shall give you the Torah."*

*They said: "Indeed, our children will be our guarantors."*

*The Holy One said: "Your children are good guarantors. For their sake I give the Torah to you." (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:24).*

This is remarkable. Our ancestors aren't good enough? Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah are lacking?

Our prophets don't make the cut? Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel fail to measure up?

They are superseded by...our kids? *Our* kids?

That's right.

The Jewish tradition exists only when it's continued. And only the next generation - every next generation - can perpetuate it. So today, the most important generation in Jewish history is...our children.

Many parents have expressed to me a wish that their own Jewish education had been more robust and fulfilling. All of us - whether our own Jewish upbringings met our needs or not - have the capacity to provide exactly that to our own children. Actually, it's our responsibility.

Recalling the giving of the Torah at Sinai reminds us that it's always the right time to renew our commitment to Jewish Education for ourselves and our kids. Beth El is committed to helping however we can, with Religious School, youth programming, and services. We see young people of all ages shine in many ways as they become knowledgeable Jews. And we thank the many, many professional staff, lay leaders and parent volunteers who work so hard to give our children the best Jewish education and experiences imaginable. I want to thank a few here today. First our clergy, Rabbi Schwab, Hazzan Sandler, and Hazzan Greenberg, who runs our fabulous weekly Jr. Congregation. We also have our professional team of Sarah Topal, Director of Youth and Family Engagement, along with Ali Drumm, Anna Besser, Alicia Vinocour, and Kory Goldenberg. Rebecca Jacobson is our Youth Community Chair, and her son Ari is BEANS president. Mary Channon is VP of Education who oversees all this. And we have wonderful volunteers who serve on our various youth committees.

But the most important Jewish educators are you, the parents.

Parents who cry when their children receive these books understand this well and can't contain the feeling that, in that moment, they are succeeding mightily. It's as close to Sinai as we can get.

Speaking of Torah and children, here's a thought I love from the Talmud about Torah and children.

There's a really odd verse in the Torah in the Book of Numbers, which says, "These are the children of Moses and Aaron: Nadav and Avihu, Elazar and Itamar." Here's the problem: Those are *Aaron's* sons, not Moses'. So why would the Torah say, "These are Moses' sons" and name those only belonging to his brother?

The Talmud understands like this: These were Aaron's sons, as he bore them. And these were Moses' sons because he taught them. See, Moses was a teacher for these four boys. He taught them wisdom, ethics, values, Mitzvot. And because he taught them, he is considered to be their adopted father.

The same is true with us. We may or may not have biological children. But we are all teachers. We all model ethical living and Jewish living to young people: our own children but also their friends, neighbors, community members, and extended family. We have much to teach them, they have much to learn from us, and we have much to learn from them. This began at Sinai and continues today and tomorrow.

To return to our starting Midrash: *The Holy One said: "Your children are good guarantors. For their sake I give the Torah to you."*

Shabbat Shalom.