

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 11/30/18

Va Yishlach 2018

One of the most important and unusual moments in interfaith dialogue occurred at a mountain retreat here in New Jersey back in 1989. The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism held a meeting with a small group of Jewish thinkers representing the four major movements of Judaism. It was likely the first time in history that a Buddhist leader sat down in dialogue with a group of Jewish leaders. Even more unusual was the purpose of the meeting. The Dalai Lama wanted advice. The Dalai Lama was, and is, in exile from his land and he wanted to know how we did it. How is it that we survived exile from our own land over the centuries? He said his question was not academic, but highly practical. The Buddhist leader, once the religious and political leader of Tibet, went into exile in 1959 in the face of the Communist takeover. He now lives in Dharamasala, India, one of the many places of Tibetan "diaspora."

The men in the group had their own answers. One said it was the study of Torah that kept us alive. Another said it was the pursuit of justice that has kept us alive. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, an Orthodox scholar said, "It is the fact that we disagree with each other all the time."

"No we don't," said Rabbi Lawrence Kushner Reform Jewish theologian. The Dalai Lama rocked with laughter. Then Dr. Blu Greenberg, the Orthodox feminist addressed the question about Jewish survival. "In times of great danger, Jews responded by having children," she said. The period immediately after the Holocaust, she added, represented the greatest numerical growth of the Jews in history. Then she told the Dalai Lama, "The secret of our survival is the Jewish family. For it is the family where the physical existence of our People and the values of Judaism intersect." And the Dalai Lama looked at Blu Greenberg and said, almost in a whisper, "That is the secret."

This treasure called Judaism is not for ourselves alone, but for generations to come. Most of us take great care in planning how to provide for our children financially, how to pay for their higher education, and even for the inheritance we will someday hopefully leave them. But there is another legacy besides the financial and another "higher education" besides the academic. One of the reasons we have three baby namings today is that parents are rediscovering the importance of planning for their children to receive a legacy of faith and an education in values. Along with an inheritance, our children deserve a heritage.

The Torah is, of course, the basis for our spiritual inheritance and heritage. In Parashat Vayishlach, Jacob and Esau are reunited after two decades. Forgetting his past enmity towards his sibling, Esau runs towards his brother Jacob, falls upon his neck, embraces and kisses him. They both weep tears of joy. Jacob offers lavish presents to his brother, explaining that they represent the blessing that he had stolen from his brother and is now returning. He asks to be accepted in forgiveness. A beautiful verse reveals Jacob's inner thoughts as he says to himself, "If I request atonement with this gift, perhaps he will forgive me." And indeed Esau accepts both the gift and his brother's penitence.

In this section, and many others like it, we learn that our forefathers were not perfect. Their greatness lies in their ability to recognize their sins, to repent and to make amends. Like all of us they are broken, but they know, and they teach us, how to put the pieces back together again. Is there a more powerful lesson that we can teach our children?

By giving our children a spiritual heritage we are giving them the opportunity to experience the emergence of their virtues in the family setting. There is a deepening of confidence and self-esteem when kids perform small acts of kindness and consideration. Life is not about being perfect. It is about continually improving and cultivating our virtues. Like an acorn, which has within it the capacity to become a towering oak, a child has great potential. Our children are, I believe, born with virtues and spiritual gifts within, waiting to grow. It is by giving them this spiritual heritage that we recognize, nurture and support those virtues that not only make them into the good people Gd intends for them to be, but give them a unique sense of pride and purpose that will spill over into everything they do.

The truth is that how they turn out is a complex and mysterious process, with many influences other than yours. But by understanding our responsibility to nurture our children through value-laden education we become the role models and mentors they truly deserve. That is a spiritual gift that we not only give to them, but to ourselves. Let us be mindful of the opportunities to uplift our children by nurturing our own spiritual growth.