

VEHIGADETA LABINCHO — THE OBLIGATION OF TELLING Implications for Family Work

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Vehigadeta—to tell and transmit knowledge and values from generation to generation—is a key concept in the Jewish tradition and one that has helped ensure Jewish continuity. Transmission is important in understanding family dynamics as well, as seen in this article's examination of survivors of the Holocaust. When family members cannot fulfill the obligation of Vehigadeta, that responsibility must be assumed by the community.

The precept, *Vehigadeta Labincho*—and thou shall tell it to thy son—is associated with the Pesach Haggadah. It is the father's obligation to convey the story of the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt. In Jewish tradition, however, the importance of telling is not limited to the Exodus experience. The transmission of knowledge is an obligation that knows no boundaries. The Torah is very specific about this obligation and directs us "to teach them . . . when thou sittest in thy house and when thou walkest by the way and when thy liest down and when thy risest up" (Deuteronomy 11:19).

This article explores the sources and significance of the ideal of *Vehigadeta* and examines its importance from an intergenerational dimension in family work. Drawing from illustrations of Holocaust survivors, the complexity of telling is illustrated, and guidelines for helping survivors and their families are explored.

TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

The Jewish tradition is very specific regarding developmental stages when children begin their intellectual pursuits. The well-known Mishna of Yehuah Ben Tema (*Ethics* 5:26) states, "At 5 years of age the study of the Bible, at 10 the study of Mishna, at 13 responsibility for the mitzvot, at 15 the

study of the Talmud." Maimonides is even more specific. At what age he asks is the father obligated to teach Torah to his son? "When he begins to speak . . . afterwards he should teach him little by little, verse by verse until he is 7" (*Hilchot Talmud Torah* 1).

The study of the Torah has a dual purpose: to gain knowledge and understanding and to translate these into action. The following talmudic passage illustrates this twofold goal:

Rabbi Tarfon and the elders were dining in the loft of Bet Nitzah in Lod. The question was asked before them. "Is study greater or is deed greater?" Rabbi Tarfon replied, "Deed is greater." Rabbi Akiva replied, "Study is greater" (*Bavli Kiddushin* 40b).

The commentaries clarify the view of Rabbi Tarfon. The ultimate goal in life for the Jew is the fulfillment of the will of God as revealed in the *mitzvot*. By performing a *mitzvah* a person steps beyond his or her being and performs godly acts, thus establishing a connection with God. Rabbi Akiva suggests that through study a person can internalize the connection to godliness not only in the realm of deed but also in thought. Therefore, a person must be complete in both deed and study. Maimonides, following the view of Rabbi Akiva, stated explicitly, "Study takes precedence over deed, for study brings about deed" (*Hilchot*

Talmud Torah 1-3). Viewed from another dimension the duality of knowledge and implementation to deed has a nobler goal. According to the commentaries, the verse in Isaiah (54:43)—"And all of your sons will be knowers of God"—suggests that a person who pursues scholarship will in time reach the nobler virtues of imitating God.

Vehigadeta, the obligation to tell, also includes children and grandchildren. Maimonides (*Hilchot Talmud Torah* 1, Mishna 1) is explicit on this point: "Just as a person is obligated to teach his son so too is he obligated to teach his grandson. 'And you shall teach them to your sons and your grandsons.'" This dictum has obvious implications for intergenerational family work as described later. Thus, the transmission of knowledge is viewed as inextricably tied to family continuity.

There are also communal obligations in the transmission process. The rabbis, reflecting upon the verse, "Teach them . . . while you sit," note that the word *V'limatem* in the Hebrew is plural, whereas *B'eshivtecho* is in the singular (Deuteronomy 11-2:19). When parents are unable or cannot find time to educate their children, then the obligation of transmission falls upon the community. It is an all-inclusive responsibility as reflected in the verse, "And you shall teach them to your son." The oral tradition clarifies, "Your sons are your students for students are also called sons" (*Kings*:1-2).

A central theme in Jewish thought is the importance of the transmission of knowledge for future generations. The inculcation of Jewish knowledge was not left solely to the rabbis but was the task of every person. Maimonides is explicit about this obligation:

The greater sages of Israel included wood choppers, water drawers, and blind men. Despite these difficulties they were occupied with Torah study day and night and were included among those who transmitted the Torah teaching from master to student in the chain stretching back to Moses our teacher (*Hilchot Talmud Torah*, Mishna 1:2).

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

The dictum—"The works of the fathers are a sign for the children" (*Bereshit Rabbah* 40)—reflects the emphasis in the Jewish tradition on linkages between the generations. On the one hand, the lessons learned and the fate of the fathers are mirrored in the destiny of the children. Yet, the actions of the parents also serve as models for children and future generations. Two brief illustrations from the book of Genesis highlight this point.

A simple act by Abraham is performed for Sarah as they travel to Beth El. Genesis 12:8 reads, "And he removed from thence unto the mountain on the east of Beth El and pitched his tent." Rashi notes that the text uses the feminine, "her tent," teaching that Abraham first pitched the tent of his wife and then his own. His action merits honor and respect and is to be emulated.

The respect given to Sarah by Abraham is also a result of Sarah's virtues. The above verse precedes the encounter with Pharaoh, who suggests that Sarah "is fit for the king" (Rashi 12:15). The merit for which the Israelites were saved is owed to Sarah. Just as they kept themselves from sinning with the Egyptians, so did Sarah protect herself from Pharaoh's advances (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 4:12).

The model set by Abraham is an additional illustration of the links between the generations. Abraham's journey to Egypt foreshadows the future Egyptian exile. Just as Abraham left "weighted down with cattle, silver, and gold," so too did the Israelites leave Egypt "with great wealth." In that way, Abraham's blessings were in a sense also given to future generations.

The theme of intergenerational linkages places importance upon names, life events, and birth order. Names are of particular interest. The names of Abram and Sarai are changed in time to Abraham and Sarah. Genesis 17:5—"But thy name shall be for a father of a multitude of nations have I made thee." Rashi comments that all the

letters of Abraham's name were retained, but this was not the case for Sarah. Sarai means "my princess"; Sarah, a princess for all. The letter removed from Sarah's name was given to Joshua, whose name was changed from Hoshea the son of Nun to Joshua. The midrash thus emphasizes the continuity from early generations to that of Moses and Joshua.

The name of Isaac is also given much attention in the Bible. "And thou shall call his name Isaac and I will establish my covenant with him"—Genesis 18:19. Rashi comments that the covenant of circumcision was to be performed by Isaac's descendants. He goes on to examine each letter and its numerical value in his name. The Yud (10) points to the 10 tests and challenges faced by Isaac. The Tzadik (90) refers to the age of Sarah when she conceived. Eight Chet (8) denotes the eighth day when Isaac was circumcised, and Kov (100) indicates the age of Abraham when Isaac was born.

At times, names have a dual significance, as with Jacob. "And your name shall no longer be Jacob; instead Israel shall be your name"—Genesis 32:29. A Hasidic explanation suggests that the names of Jacob and Israel denote two stages in the service of God, both of which are necessary at different times in the life of every Jew. Israel denotes a higher achievement of peoplehood, but it does not supplant or remove the necessity for the service signified by Jacob.

A salient dimension of intergenerational influence is found in the relationship of Jacob and Joseph. Rashi writes,

The biblical text ascribes the generations of Jacob to Joseph. . . . The fine appearance of Joseph was similar to his. Also whatever happened to Jacob happened to Joseph. The former was hated and the latter was hated. The former's brother sought to kill him, and the latter's brother sought to kill him (Genesis: 37-2).

In addition, Jacob displayed the virtues of kindness and forgiveness to Esau as did Joseph to his brothers.

TRANSMISSIONS IN FAMILY WORK

Intergenerational transmission is an important dynamic in family work (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen 1988). In the past decade family theorists have placed greater importance on establishing connections with past generations as a means of comprehending family interaction more fully (Hartmen & Laird 1983). Families develop a hierarchy of obligations over generations, which can be seen as a balance of merit and indebtedness in light of present and past relationships (Nagy & Spark, 1973). Helping persons deal with loyalties to the past and unfinished business can enrich present family functioning (Schindler, 1988). In fact, sharing among the generations—values, culture, religion, and history—contributes to the family's continuity and stability. Transmitting family values and beliefs across the generations can enable the family to realize a sense of autonomy and differentiation. "A family can be kept fairly stable and intact for several generations based on a rigidly held system of beliefs. . . . The belief system may help the family function above its basic level. The more intact an extended family system, the more potential it has to be a nuclear family" (Kerr & Bowen, 1978).

Yet, some persons have great difficulty engaging in the transmission interchange and thereby resolving past events. For example, the Ethiopian Jews who emigrated to Israel during Operation Moses have found it difficult to engage in the normative mourning process because many were separated from their extended family members (Schindler, 1990).

This inability to mourn is also true of Holocaust survivors who refuse to share their repressed memories with family and friends. Rosenbloom (1988) notes that mourning at the time of the Holocaust would have been suicidal. However, since the Holocaust, survivors have found it difficult to engage in the normative mourning process for several reasons. As Cohen (1991, p. 229) suggests, successful bereavement

may never be experienced because of the survivors' inability to get in touch with their own emotions as they defend themselves against feelings so "intense, threatening, and painful that one must ward them off by deadening oneself or by escaping into denial." Guilt over surviving is another obstacle to engaging in the mourning process (Moses, 1990).

The role of survivor as witness is complex and elusive. Laub (1990, p. 10) writes:

It was not the reality of the situation and the lack of the responsiveness of bystanders or the world that accounts for the fact that history was taking place with no witnesses. It was also the very circumstance of being inside the event that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist. That is, someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed.

Language is also a barrier to transmission as the Israeli novelist Aharon Appelfeld (1988) suggests;

During the war it seemed that for years until we reached a ripe old age we would never cease telling the horrors of war. . . . After the war that desire was overturned. Everything that happened was so gigantic, so inconceivable that the witness even seemed like a fabrication to himself. The feeling that your experience cannot be told, that no one can understand is perhaps one of the worst that was felt by the survivors after the war. It is not surprising that so many persons could not speak.

Laub describes the inadequacy of language in another way.

The imperative to tell and be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task. Yet, no amount of telling seems to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory, and speech (Laub, 1990, p. 10).

Those who sought help were often confronted with the inability of their worker to comprehend these awesome experiences; the professional relationship was therefore characterized by a lack of trust (Chadoff, 1981). Pines (1990) suggests that the Holocaust may remain a secret in the analytic space in the family and "revelations of such unbearable material may be avoided by the collusion of both patient and therapist."

VEHIGADETA: THE ROLE OF CHILDREN

The Pesach Haggadah urges the father to respond to the four questions customarily asked by the youngest child at the Seder table, and during the Seder all present are symbolically encouraged to fulfill the precept, "as if we were now partaking in the Exodus."

Just as at the Seder, it is the children who are the catalysts to the intergenerational transmission of knowledge from their parents—Holocaust survivors. Now adults themselves, the children of survivors encourage their parents to end the years of silence and repression. According to Cohen (1991, p. 230), "Mental health professionals who work with aging survivors need to direct their attention to the children in order to enlist their support in assisting their parents."

During the years of silence, disavowal of the past was the rule. Unlike denial, disavowal deletes the significance of events, but not their perception. The children know of the events, but dare not relate to them. Ending the years of silence can benefit not only the survivors but also their children who can then work out their own conflictual feelings and clarify for themselves their parents' experiences.

One child of a survivor described how she encouraged her mother to end her silence.

When we were growing up in New York, it was forbidden to speak about the Holocaust though I knew my parents had experienced severe atrocities. My parents had lost their

families in the Shoah. I always felt that raising the subject brought up too many painful memories. I had gone to Israel to study, met my husband, and subsequently had a family. When my parents retired they joined us, moving close to our home. It was close to my son's Bar Mitzvah that my mother became very agitated and concerned about his safety. She would call me at all hours, and I had to reassure her that my son was fine. One evening she became very agitated and anxious, and I went to visit her. It was then that I brought up the subject of her anxiety and asked if it was related to her own experiences and more specifically to the Shoah. It was a longstanding issue which I wanted to raise since I was an adolescent but never dared to. She said nothing, but arrived the next morning carrying a tattered book. It was a diary that she kept during her years in hiding. I was determined to read it, only to discover that it was written in the Slavic language. She refused to translate it, saying it was too painful for her. She was ready to share some of her experiences, but still it was very painful for her, even after so many years. In time she read me passages from the diary, but it was never translated. It gave me a glimpse into my family's past.

Sometimes, during such occasions as Yom HaShoah, Memorial Day, or the Yom Kippur memorial service, when the memories of loved ones are recalled, children take courage and dare to break the silence. In the case below, the catalyst was a family celebration.

The parents, now in their early eighties, had fled Germany when the child was age 5. The children recalled that mother had departed very suddenly, saying a brief goodbye at the school yard. They remained in Germany for over a year and were subsequently rescued. Mother's departure was never explained and remained a mystery for well over 40 years. The children felt a sense of abandonment though this was never clarified. At a family gathering to celebrate one of the grandchildren's birthday, the subject somehow was raised. Mother was very upset and in a very emotional tone said, "It was the only way we could be saved." She then explained how she had made arrangements

for the children to go into hiding. Indeed had they returned home with their mother, the Nazis would have sent them to the assembly point for deportation. It was the first time the issue was actually cleared up and accepted. Upon departing, one of the children commented how heroic mother was and "in 2 hours we learned more than 40 years of silence."

Often, grandchildren help grandparents reveal their painful experiences, encouraged by their own curiosity about historical events or by school and community activities.

A 16-year-old-girl had taken a trip with her schoolmates to Poland. It was part of the school's curriculum to become familiar with the past of her people. She visited Auschwitz and was deeply moved. Upon her return she was told that her maternal grandparents had been at Auschwitz, but they never shared this secret with her. Her parents had also been reluctant over the years to share this information with her. The young girl was determined to explore her family's past in greater detail. It was primarily through her determination and perseverance that her grandparents began to share with her their experiences. The following summer she persuaded her mother and grandparents to visit Auschwitz again. Almost five decades had passed. The story of annihilation and continuity had come full circle.

One cannot underestimate the importance of these transmissions. As Hartmen and Laird (1983, p. 363) suggest, for the older generation, "It is the giving of their history to safekeeping for future generations. For the younger family members they seek this information in order to consolidate their own identities."

VEHIGADETA—THE ROLE OF THE HELPING PROFESSION

The literature has documented the difficulty of working with survivors and the obstacles that workers face in establishing meaningful relationships with them (Davidson, 1980). Clients who are reticent and often

refuse to discuss material related to the past may set limited parameters of intervention, which should be respected. Too, issues of paternalism may surface (Schindler, 1987).

However, there are periods in the life cycle where recalling and reminiscing may be appropriate. Often, it is during retirement that the desire to end one's silence occurs (Krystal, 1981). As the person ages, there is a shift "from doing to thinking, from planning to reminiscing . . . to reviewing and rethinking one's life." Klein (1973), who worked extensively with Holocaust survivors in Israel, proposes the notion of healthy survivor guilt, which links survivors and offspring. Its dominant elements are sorrow, nostalgia, and responsibility. Healthy survival guilt requires a certain degree of maturity and health on the part of the ego. To survive, some survivors need to tell and relate their experiences, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which they have to protect themselves. They have to know their own buried truth in order to live and grow.

A therapeutic goal of work with Holocaust survivors is to elicit the coping skills that enabled them to survive against such great adversity. One way to do so is to emphasize the strengths of the survivors by helping them relate to those factors that enabled them to survive. For many, the source of their strength was memory. For some it was the memory of loved ones. A sole survivor of ten children recalled being given a picture of his father as a young boy. He devised a way to attach the picture to the sole of his shoe so that it would always be part of him. In his most difficult moments, when he was often near death he would reflect upon the picture and it gave him strength. Another survivor recalls,

It was 1942 and I was 16 at the time, and my father served as head of the Jewish community in Poland. It was because of my father's promise to me that the war would be over in the summer that I agreed to flee.

We would meet in Warsaw, he said. I recall vividly the cold winter morning when I left home. . . . I never saw him again. . . . It was the hope that we would see each other in due time that enabled me to carry on. It's painful, but his memory accompanies me everywhere.

Memories and their disclosure have important therapeutic benefits for families and for older adults in particular. Sharing of reminiscences facilitates dealing with unfinished business, enabling the older person to continue to work and to grow. Butler (1963, 1975), an early pioneer in researching the aging process, suggests that reminiscing reawakens the mental and emotional faculties of the individual. Hausman (1981) notes that reminiscence facilitates ego integrity, self-esteem, maturity, and serenity. McMahon and Rhudick's (1964) work on reminiscence notes these benefits:

The maintenance of self-esteem in the face of declining physical and intellectual abilities; coping with grief and depression resulting from losses; finding means to contribute significantly to a society of which older persons are members; and retaining some sense of identity critical in an increasingly estranged environment.

Individual and group counseling can make this transmission possible. Sessions with the family of origin enable the worker to obtain a broader perspective of family history and how it relates to present relationships. Bringing the family together and helping members share their past are important aims. The social worker's role is to sustain these extended relationships and to facilitate understanding among family members. Enabling the sharing of past history for future generations is a value deeply cherished in Jewish tradition.

CONCLUSION

Vehigadeta—to tell and transmit from generation to generation—is central to Jewish thought. It is vital in the sharing of

knowledge and values, thereby ensuring the continuity of the Jewish heritage. Transmissions are important in understanding family dynamics as well. For survivors of the Holocaust, their children and grandchildren are often the catalysts in enabling them to deal with their past.

The obligation to understand the past falls upon the family, but it is not family bound. When the family members cannot fulfill this obligation, it must be assumed by the community. Rabbinic thought and contemporary family theory serve as guidelines for the social worker and educator in bringing families together and helping them grow.

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JEWISH FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION FOR EXPECTANT PARENTS

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This article describes a model Jewish family life education program for expectant parents that is co-sponsored by a Jewish Family Service agency and a synagogue. The participants not only learn about Jewish birth rituals but also explore their own feelings about those rituals in the presence of other expectant parents. The program enables the synagogue and the family agency to connect meaningfully with families experiencing life-cycle events.

When individuals and families experience life-cycle events, such as a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, wedding, or funeral, they often connect with a synagogue and the Jewish Family Service (JFS) agency in their community. The synagogue becomes involved because of the special role of the Hebrew school or the need for rabbinic involvement in the ceremonies. The JFS connection is more subtle. Before or after such life-cycle events, families often experience stress and upheaval, causing them to seek counseling services.

This article describes a Jewish family life education (JFLE) program conducted in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in which the authors worked together with couples who were expecting a baby. The program can serve as a model of JFLE in which small groups, experiencing life-cycle events, come together for mutual learning and sharing. In JFLE programs that are co-sponsored by the JFS and another institution (in this case, the local Conservative synagogue), the joint leadership of rabbi and social worker provides complementary

perspectives and skills and greatly enhances the value of the program to the participants.

LIFE-CYCLE EVENTS AND PROGRAMMING OPPORTUNITIES

All families experience life-cycle events as a normal part of family life. Milestone moments often serve as markers of these events. The wedding ceremony is the beginning of the creation of a new family unit, the birth of a child indicates a shift from a dyad relationship of husband and wife to a broader concept of family, and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah marks the beginning of adolescence.

When a couple looks forward to such events they know they are charting new waters in the life of their family. They see the changes as normal and universal and do not perceive their struggles dealing with these changes as pathological or as a sign of weakness in themselves or in their family.

Several factors influence a couple's willingness to participate in JFLE programs pertaining to the impending change in their family life. The size of the community in which they live affects a couple's readiness to meet in a group setting to discuss concerns around family life; the smaller

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