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Edah Happenings:

Regional Conference in Boston— Nov. 18th –19th

Edah at the JCC in Manhattan w/ Dr. Amnon Shapira Nov 30, Dec 7, 14, 21, 7:30 pm

Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller @ JCC in Manhattan Nov. 21 7:30 pm

And Sarah Laughed

By Rabbi Saul J. Berman

As Sarah hears the astonishing news that she is yet to bear a child with her husband, Avraham, she laughs (Gen 18:12). God responds to Avraham in apparent anger, "Why did Sarah laugh. is anything impossible for God to do?! (18:13-14).

Why is God angry with Sarah at her incredulity? In the preceding chapter, when God first informed Avraham that he would have a son with Sarah, Avraham also laughed (Gen. 17:16-19). God's response to that laughter was not anger, it was reassurance, including the indication that the child's name would be Yitzchok, as a play on the word "Tzachak", describing Avraham's laughter.

Then why, only a short time later, is God angry with Sarah for her laughter at the same message?

Perhaps God is, in fact, not angry with Sarah, but with Avraham. God may be saying to Avraham, "If Sarah is laughing, that means that this is the first that she is hearing of this particular Divine promise. Why have you not told Sarah about this? Are you so busy with your own life, including your persistent welcoming of strangers wandering through the desert, that you don't have time to talk to your wife?"

In fact, in Gen 18:13-14, the expression of Divine anger, is specifically addressed to Abraham. Verse 15 then records God's gentler conversation with Sarah in which His reassurance of the certainty of the promise is affirmed. Then God's anger is that Avraham has failed to properly develop the necessary degree of openness of communication in his relationship with his wife

But perhaps God's anger with Avraham is occasioned by yet another concern. If Avraham failed to share the information with Sarah, perhaps that indicates a continuing lack of faith on the part of Avraham that the promise will be fulfilled. Is it possible that Avraham failed to tell Sarah because

he did not want to expose her to greater disappointment in the event of the failure of the promise. In this case, the relationship with Sarah is fine, but the relationship to God is really weak.

It is certainly the case that the willingness to share one's beliefs with others is a critical indication of the depth of those beliefs. The Sages consider it to be the case that fulfillment of the Mitzvah of Love of God is achieved not only through the inner state of feeling about God, but also in the degree to which one reaches out to share that belief and feeling. One in love, desires that others also come to appreciate and love the object of his or her love.

In the thirteenth blessing of the weekday Amidah, the petition for the restoration of proper spiritual leaders for the Jewish nation, we conclude the blessing with the words, "Uleolam lo nevosh ki vecha batachnu." This is usually translated as, "May we never come to shame, because in Thee we trust." In the light of God's critique of Avraham, perhaps we could understand the phrase differently by translating the Hebrew word "ki" as "that" instead of as "because." In which case, the phrase would mean the following: "May we never feel ashamed that we believe in You."

May we indeed never feel ashamed of our Jewishness. May we never feel uncomfortable about covering our heads in manifestation of our awareness of God. May we never feel embarrassed about having to take a short break in the middle of the day to daven Mincha. May we never feel excluded by the need to refrain from participation in licentious parties. May we never feel that we are being overly righteous in our insistence on maintaining the highest standards of business and interpersonal ethics.

May we share our faith in pride.

Rabbi Saul Berman, Director of Edah, teaches Jewish Law at Stern College and at Columbia University School of Law.

The Millennial Generation: The Future of Jewish College Communities?

By Rabbi Yehuda Sarna

The National Jewish Population Survey in 2001 found that roughly ten percent of Jewish college students declare themselves Orthodox.

The study which Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life which plans to unveil next week will indicate that more students than ever before have just one Jewish parent, date non-Jews, and see Judaism as a culture, not a religion. News of this phenomenon is likely to spawn conversations about how best to hit the bull's eye of this target population through cultural programs and social action.

But what the study will not report is that the other fastest-growing Jewish population on college campuses comes from the opposite end of the religious spectrum. Recently, the number of Jewishly empowered, predominantly Orthodox, day school products who socialize mostly with their own kind and view Judaism as their religion has ballooned. Perhaps the focus should be less on one target and more on how to achieve a beneficial chemistry between two very different groups.

The recent surge of highly empowered Jewish students is easily discernible in Hillels across the country. Of the twenty top feeder high schools to New York University, the largest private university in the country, five are Orthodox. Four years ago, none even made the list.

This trend will only become more acute. The National Jewish Population Survey in 2001 found that roughly ten percent of Jewish college students declare themselves Orthodox, while one third of Jewish students attend Hillel at least once throughout their college experience. According to the UJA Federation of New York Jewish Community Study in 2002, more than half of the children in the Metropolitan area (including the five boroughs, Westchester, Nassau and Suffolk) under age six being raised Jewish are members of Orthodox households. True, New York's Orthodox community is disproportionately large compared to the national average, and true, some Orthodox communities will not send their children to a secular college. But there is no question, anecdotally or statistically, that traditional Jews will constitute more and more of the Jewish campus population.

In addition, it will be difficult not to see them on campus. Unlike the growing numbers of students with one Jewish parent, graduates of day schools instinctively seek out and settle in dedicated Jewish spaces. They will make Hillel their home.

So the real question is not how Hillel should engage the growing numbers of students with one Jewish parent but, rather, what model might succeed in integrating a questioning, self-conscious and loosely-connected set of individuals with an empowered, religious, and internally networked community.

The first step is sensitization of empowered students. Day school teachers, congregational rabbis, and Hillel professionals should assume the responsibility, given the contemporary reality, of educating their students about the fact that Jewish identity has religious and cultural dimensions. For example, just because some students have non-Jewish mothers does not prevent them from identifying as Jewish if they were so raised.

I often share with my students the deep pain that students with one Jewish parent feel when they hear someone tell them, "Oh, so you're not really Jewish" or ask them to be their shabbos goy. One such student broke down in tears when she decided to walk up nine flights of stairs to her room on Friday night, only to have an Orthodox student ask her why she didn't just take the elevator.

The second necessary step is the creation of safe, nonreligious spaces for students with one Jewish parent. Hillels will initiate more arts programming, social justice opportunities, and exposure to secular Israeli culture, but to truly succeed, these ventures will need to compete with the activities of emerging traditional communities in terms of numbers or content. The best way of sensitizing already empowered religious students is by showing them a compelling power of another persuasion. Otherwise, the imbalance of grassroots religious activity with staff-initiated, moderately attended cultural programming will only feed the stereotype that Millennials adhere to a "less Jewish" version of Judaism.

Third, I hope Hillel does not underestimate is the potential for the authentic, close-knit feeling of traditional communities to attract spiritually seeking students with one Jewish parent. Cultural and social action programs do not exist in a vacuum, with no growing religious community nearby. Some students I've met construct their own Judaism. Others deepen their cultural Jewish identity through arts programming, social action or support for Israel. But the spiritual seekers among them tend to gravitate toward the intensely religious community and want to have their identity crisis resolved through religious activities.

Ignoring the emerging population of day school products will only make them feel unwanted and defensive. They're not going away. Why not embrace both sides of the spectrum?

Rabbi Yehuda Sarna is the Campus Rabbi at the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life at New York University and the Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus Educator.

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