

Parashat Vayakheil – Families and Faith

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“Civilization depends on the health of the traditional family”. So begins Rod Dreher’s persuasive and insightful article in last Sunday’s Dallas Morning News Points Section, (“Our Families, Our Future,” 2/17) in which he describes in vivid colors the crisis that is upon us, and warns of coming ramifications that are no less than chilling. The family in America today is failing and disappearing, and that failure will soon bring down our very society, he claims. “It will expire from lack of manpower, which itself is a manifestation of a lack of the will to live”. It will go the way of ancient Greece and of Rome after it. The writing is on the wall, he says. And he is absolutely right.

Paraphrasing the late Harvard sociologist Carle C. Zimmerman, Dreher writes that the core problem is a loss of faith. Ultimately, what inspires men and women to create and nurture large, strong families, is religious conviction. That type of faith is sorely lacking amongst most moderns, even among many who style themselves religious.

But why? Why do religion and family seem to be intertwined? Or to phrase it differently, faith in what? What is the nature of faith that brings us to sacrifice for family? What is it exactly that so many Americans are lacking? As insightful as Dreher’s article is, he does not answer this cardinally important question. As a man of faith and a man of family, and an orthodox rabbi as well, perhaps I can.

In one word the answer is tradition. But tradition is too often misunderstood; it is not merely something carried over from the past, however meaningful that past may be. It is not just rituals and customs, memories and belief. Tradition is something for the future. It has been passed on for generations because of a fervent conviction that the future needs the past, that former generations have something vital to say to those not yet born. Jewish tradition contains a vision for the future, and a blueprint for how to accomplish it.

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My tradition tells me that man matters. Humanity and human history are part of a grand tapestry in the process of being woven, and I am one of the weavers. We are elements in a work in progress, a grand experiment. And I have been bequeathed a glimpse of the grand plan. I have something that humanity needs to weave this tapestry well. The world will be a better place if I pass on what has been passed on to me. And the more that receive it from me, the better for all. That being the case, how could passing it on to children not be of paramount importance? How could I let that tradition die with me?

You see, I must have children, because I have a way of life that the world requires, and I need a vehicle to live out these values until they will eventually redeem the world. I have faith that I have a treasure to give my children. This treasure is for them, but not just for them, and it is therefore that much more valuable. It is for their children and grandchildren. And it is not just for my descendants, but it is for all. Not for all to adopt, but certainly for all to learn from.

Living a good life is not easy. It requires training and experience. For three thousand years the Jewish tradition has been developing and refining the art of living. It has in its possession a handbook for life, for the life of the individual, but not only for the individual. Rather for the individual as a building block of the collective. We have a vision for the world, for a redeemed and perfected humanity. We cannot but continue to pass it on.

Jewish faith is not so much a belief in what will be, as an acting out of what can be. We live a life of strict adherence to commandments, imperatives of proper action, as we endeavor to establish within our families and communities models of what all humanity should aspire to. We consciously see ourselves as a holy nation and a kingdom of priests, living out and living up to a higher standard whose time may not yet have come, but surely will. At such time I may not be around, but I will do my best to insure that my descendants will, and that they will be carrying with them the accumulated wisdom of Jewish tradition. I am a link in a chain that began when Moses brought the Torah down from Mount Sinai and that stretches forward in time until the final days of the Messiah – the final perfection of the world. That future depends on the past, and it is only the present that links the two. Every generation is supremely conscious of the fact that the chain is only as strong as its weakest link. I will do all that I can not to break it.

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