



Do We Have a Torah Obligation to Learn from History?

Why Not Learn from the Experience of Others?

During my teens, my father OB"Y, repeatedly advised me, "You don't need to go through everything on your own body! Why not learn from the experience of others?!" These words were in response to my experiential adventures as a rowdy teenager in the 70ties. In order to satisfy my inquisitive nature, I was not afraid to try out everything, taking in the world with all my senses. I didn't heed my father's advice, since, at that time, I perceived myself as the center of the universe. How could I learn from others, who didn't have my kind of expansive worldview and didn't understand what was important for me? It was only much later in life, after returning to the Torah fold, that I finally understood the importance of learning from others. *Parashat Ha'azinu*, explicitly prompts us to learn from our fathers and elders, as it states, "...Ask your father, and he will tell you; your elders, and they will inform you" (*Devarim* 32:7). Learning from fathers, mentors and teachers requires a level of humility that I was missing, when I lived in the free, permissive, self-centered Western world. Even as a Torah observant Jew, I was still lacking the humility to learn from my parents, since I had now discovered the truth of Torah, of which they were ignorant. It was only after my father passed away, and I took upon myself to translate his memoir, that I realized how much I could learn from my father. His memoir is a great gift and legacy for future generations, preserving a recollection of a time bygone, with a message so vital for our materialistic culture. I hope that his grandchildren feel the same way, if not now, at least when they mature. My father put all his heart and soul into writing down his illustrated memoir, with photos of his family four generations back, to bequeath a most accurate recollection of his family history to his descendants. I'm especially in awe of the photos of my father's great-grandparents, my great, great-grandparents, and the great, great, great, great-grandparents of my grandchildren! While my great, great-grandfather with his handsome beard slightly resembles my husband, wearing the exact same kind of kippah, my modest great, great-grandmother looks nothing like me! Yet, it is very comforting to see black on white, how we have come full circle, embracing the eternal Torah that our ancestors faithfully kept. (Adapted from my introduction to [My Memoir: The Story of a Danish Jew who Fled the Nazis](#)).

Coming Full Circle

Perhaps we can say that the first Jewish memoir is Moshe's song of *Ha'azinu*. Before his demise, "Moshe came and spoke all the words of this song into the ears of the people..." (*Devarim* 32:44). The word שיר/*shir* – 'song' in the holy tongue is related to the word שרשרת/*Sharsheret* – 'chain' made up of many links, that together form a circle. Thus, song in the Torah expresses coming full circle. Therefore, all the songs in the Torah are written after a completion, when all the details are woven together to form a complete harmony. For this reason, Moshe, the head of all the prophets, could only recite this song, when his entire life was behind him. Likewise, my father, at the end of his life, managed to bequeath to us, his daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren the rich legacy of our roots. It's hard for me to explain why this memoir means so much to me. Since I have lost my father, and can no longer ask him to tell me the story of his and his family's past, all that's left is my memory of him, plus videos, photos and his memoir. I'm thankful that my father told me about "the years of the past generations." Understanding about our past, offers us perspective for the future. My father's memoir establishes that I'm not just a random feather blowing in the wind. I'm part of an unbroken chain of hardworking Jews from

time bygone. Thus, it teaches me that, after all, I am not the center of the universe. I'm only one link in the long chain of generations before me, and to those to follow. Knowing about my ancestors, helps me anchor myself in the place of yesteryear, grounding myself in the roots of my heritage. My father's memoir transports me back to being a little girl, once again sitting on my father's lap and asking him questions. In his memoir, he anticipated the questions I would want to ask, and he patiently answered them, one by one. "O Father, thank you for caring enough about us to leave part of yourself and your legacy behind!" (Adapted from my introduction to [My Memoir: The Story of a Danish Jew who Fled the Nazis](#)).

Who says that "History has to Repeat Itself"?

Although I always emphasize to my students that the Tanach (Bible) is not a history book, one way of understanding "Ask your father" is that it instructs us how to learn history by reading the Torah carefully (*Tzeror HaMor*, *Devarim* 32:7). There are several perspectives on the parameters for understanding history. In elementary school, I learned the *great man theory* – a 19th-century idea, that world history is created by the impact of great men, heroes, or highly influential and unique individuals. Due to their natural attributes, such as superior intellect or heroic courage, each made a decisive historical effect. In high-school, I learned *historical materialism* – the Marxist conception of history, which opposes the notion that history is driven by the consciousness or ideals of individuals. Rather, according to this perspective, it is the material reality that creates human consciousness – i.e. history is the result of material conditions rather than ideals. Neither of these two views of history concur with the Torah perspective. Then, how do we understand history according to the Torah? Rather than being subject to the influence of great men or material conditions, history is created by the one and only Creator. Golden periods in Jewish history are a result of our following G-d's directives, as brought down in the Torah. We see repeated patterns in the Tanach: When the Jewish people were tempted into idol-worship, they lost all their wars. When the Israelites served Hashem and kept His Torah, they experienced great accomplishments including spiritual and economic growth. Remembering and understanding the past helps us to place events within their proper perspective. When we get this, then, 'History doesn't have to repeat itself.' We can learn from the mistakes, failures and successes of our ancestors to repeat only that which is favorable and in accordance with the Divine will. This is why the Torah isn't a history book, because the main message of the Torah is to teach the way of G-d in the spiritual and ethical realm, rather than making an accurate comprehensive account of every historical event. The Torah only includes those historical events that serve to help us realize how to perfect our spiritual and moral integrity.

Reflect upon History to Recognize the Messianic Future

This perspective on history teaches us that remembering historical facts is not sufficient. Rather, we must also consider and contemplate them to understand their significance. Therefore, the Torah instructs us to not only remember but also to reflect upon past events:

ספר דברים פרק לב פסוק ז זָכֹר יָמוֹת עוֹלָם בֵּינוּ שָׁנוֹת דֹּר וָדֹר שֶׁאֵל אָבִיךָ וַיְגִדְךָ זִקְנֶיךָ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָךְ:

"Remember the days of old; reflect upon the years of [other] generations. Ask your father, and he will tell you; your elders, and they will inform you" (*Devarim* 32:7).

According to the principle of 'Divine History,' Rashi explains, REMEMBER THE DAYS OF OLD – what G-d did to past generations who provoked Him to anger. REFLECT UPON THE YEARS OF [OTHER] GENERATIONS – the generation of Enosh, whom [G-d] inundated with the waters of the ocean, and the generation of the Flood, whom He washed away.

According to the approach of Arizal, history reveals that every individual as well as the entire planet must eventually reach *tikun* (rectification). Thus, REFLECT that sometimes an entire generation must return in a collective reincarnation to receive another opportunity to fix something that the generation missed implementing the first time around (Knesset Yechezkel, *Peninei HaHassidut*). The aim of learning from past events is to create a better future which culminates in the coming of Mashiach and ultimate redemption. Along these lines, Rashi's additional explanation teaches us the importance of focusing on the brighter future: REFLECT UPON THE YEARS OF GENERATIONS – to recognize the future, that He has the power to bestow good upon you and to give you as an inheritance the days of the Mashiach and the world-to-come (*Sifrei* 32:6; Rashi, *Devarim* 32:7). Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson of Lubavitch expounds upon this Rashi, and prompts parents to educate their children about Mashiach, and not rely upon the child picking up the knowledge by himself. Although the concept of Mashiach is quite lofty, it is one of our principles of faith, which needs to be taught to children even at a young age. With a child, we stress the fact that with the coming of Mashiach, "delicacies will be as plentiful as dust," (Rambam), as this is something a kid can relate to easily. When the child matures, so too, will his perception of Mashiach. As the Rambam teaches, "Anyone who does not believe in Mashiach, or whoever does not look forward to his coming, denies not only [the teachings of] the other prophets but [also those] of the Torah and of Moshe our Teacher" (*Mishna Torah, Laws of Kings* 11:1). In conclusion, the purpose of reflecting on the past, is to recognize our part in the Divine design of history, with the aim of transporting all reality to the perfected Messianic future.