

ANCESTORS AND LEGACIES: PURPOSEFUL PLANNING OR NEUTRAL NEGLECT

By Rabbi Jerome M. Epstein

At this time of the year especially, we reflect on our ancestors – the ancestors we read about in the Torah, the figures who shaped our people's history, and our own families' forebears. Each contributed to our life, uniquely adding to our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual DNA.

Just as it is important to remember our ancestors, it also is crucial to remember that we too will be someone's ancestors some day. What kind of role models will we be? What legacy will we leave to our children? What inheritance will our descendants be able to attribute to us? Will they do so with pride? And how will we transmit the legacy we would like our descendants to inherit?

We sometimes miss an opportunity to become the ancestors we want to be simply because we choose not to assert ourselves, preferring to be neutral in guiding our youth. We refrain from exerting influence on them. To become worthy ancestors, though, requires purposeful planning, not neutral neglect.

We transfer our nonmaterial inheritance from one generation to the next through education, both formal and informal. The Jewish community has a well-deserved reputation for its commitment to learning. That commitment is

embedded in traditional Jewish values. Parents are obligated by Jewish law to teach their children a trade so they can sustain themselves and the families they will have some day. They are mandated as well to teach their children practical life skills. For instance, the Talmud teaches that parents are obligated, among other things, to teach their children to swim (Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 29a).

Although it is essential to teach children how to earn a living and to function in the world, it is also vital for parents to teach their children how to relate to God and to nourish their souls. Indeed, this is what we read in Deuteronomy 6, and it has been canonized in our sidur in the *v'ahavta* prayer. We must teach our children how to love God – but we should not confine our educational efforts to our own children. The Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy 6:6 mandates that we must teach not only our biologic offspring but anyone whom we can influence.

Each of us can make a significant contribution to make sure that our cherished values do not die with us. How do we do that? How can we prepare ourselves to become better ancestors?

First, each of us transmits that which is important to us by what we say and what we do, not by what we think but do not model. We cannot assume that our children or our community will know that we think Judaism is important unless we say and act it clearly. Feeling it in our hearts is not sufficient. Our children have to hear from our lips that we care that they

live as Jews, and they have to see us live Jewish priorities so they can follow our example. We are their ancestors.

Living the Jewish calendar in our homes creates an ambience in which our children experience Jewish living as the way they live their own lives. Living the values of *g'milut hased* (acts of lovingkindness), *tzedaka* (acts of righteousness), and *derekh eretz* (treating others with sensitivity) creates models to transmit those values to our heirs. Becoming an ancestor means accepting responsibility.

Second, Conservative congregations play an important role in transmitting our heritage. Quality formal Jewish education and dynamic informal Jewish education help to shape Jewish souls. Congregations must invest in highly qualified and committed educators and youth leaders. It is unacceptable to tolerate mediocrity. Our children deserve the best we can offer.

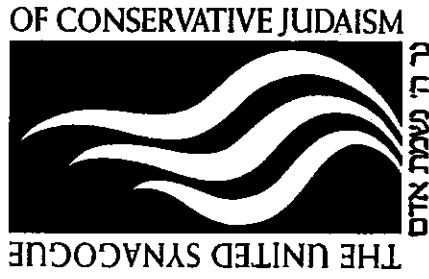
Rather than surrendering to those who request less education, parents must demand more. Instead of responding positively to those who call for diminished standards, we must require accountability. After all, we are the ancestors of tomorrow.

Rather than trying to reduce the congregational youth activities budget, we must find ways to invest more. Rather than viewing USY and Kadima as a burden on the congregational budget, we must learn from those synagogues that continually enrich the lives of their teenagers through stellar USY and Kadima activities. Instead of looking for subsidies for USY activities

and considering USY advisers' salaries as a burden, we must seek ways to enhance our resources so that we can provide the best for our children. After all, we will be their ancestors.

Third, we must create vibrant experiences for our children and teens. Children learn best through living. Studying and discussing Judaism creates a background, but it is through the experiential that Judaism comes alive. With the help of the congregation, parents and grandparents can enrich the lives of future generations through enabling their participation in experiences that will further Jewish values and Conservative Jewish living. When we send our children on such USY summer programs as Israel Pilgrimage and USY on Wheels we provide an enjoyable summer experience – and much more. When we send our children to Camp Ramah, we provide a great camping experience – and much more. The experiences we provide our teens will influence and help determine the lives they will live. These programs inspire Jewish living as shaped by Conservative Judaism. Not all programs are the same!

We have a responsibility to provide for the future. After all, we are the ancestors of future generations.



ANCESTORS AND LEGACIES: PURPOSEFUL PLANNING OR NEUTRAL NEGLECT

By Rabbi Jerome M. Epstein

The United Synagogue
of Conservative Judaism

Rapaport House
155 Fifth Ave., NY, NY 10010
Tel: 212-533-7800 / Fax: 212-353-9439
E-mail: info@uscj.org / Website: www.uscj.org