

Teach Your Parents Well...
Yom Kippur Yizkor 5774
September 14, 2013

It is not a new thing that Religious Schools are trying to bring the latest and greatest of the outside world into our classrooms, to connect with our kids, to make our teaching seem relevant. I remember a new, young rabbinic intern at the synagogue where I was raised, who taught Torah through the lyrics of popular rock songs.

That is, actually, where I first encountered Crosby Stills Nash and Young. But, of course, he selected his songs carefully. Even though there were theological references to a child of God and billion year old carbon in it, he wasn't exactly going to risk teaching "By the time we got to Woodstock, we were half a million strong." Rather, what I remember, to this day, is the lesson at which we carefully studied – almost as if it was a text from the Talmud -- the lyrics of "Teach Your Children Well."

You, who are on the road, must have a code, that you can live by.
And so, become yourself, because the past, is just a good bye.
Teach, your children well, their father's hell, did slowly go by,
And feed, them on your dreams, the one they picked,
the one you're known by.
Don't you ever ask them why, if they told you you would cry,
So just look at them and sigh, and know they love you.

The song opens addressing an older generation, speaking to them about a younger one. But in the second stanza the subjects switch, and so we are told that "you of tender years can't know the fears that your elders grew by... Teach your parents well..."

I have been thinking about that phrase a lot lately. “Teach your parents well.” In context, it means, of course, to teach *them*, so they can learn. But that is not how I have been hearing it. Instead, as we approach Yizkor, as we look back in love and memory, what occurs to me is that the words could mean not “teach *them*”, but “*teach* them”, not *to* them but *about* them. This is a teaching that is not within your family, but outside it, and about it!

“*Sh'ma b'ni musar avicha,*” we read in the book of Proverbs, “*v'al titosh Torat imecha;* hear, my son, the instruction of your father, and forsake not the teaching of your mother!” And so I ask you now, are you... are you teaching your parents' Torah in your life? And if so, how are you doing that? Do you... do you know what that Torah was, what they stood for, what they cared the most about, what they would cherish the most of their view of the world, and want to be carried on? Are you, indeed, teaching your parents' Torah? Do you, can you... teach your parents well?

Traditionally, and in our personal lives as well, there are, I think, two ways to do this. There is imitation. And there is innovation. Both of these can honor the memory, carry on the visions and values of our parents. But these are, obviously, very different paths of devotion and respect, and often they are in opposition to one another.

Imagine a king, who inherits a realm, and rules by trying to keep everything the same. In some ways there is nothing wrong with this: this is an approach that will preserve the most of what was, keep the rooms and styles

and fixture and furniture the same, honor in the form of a living shrine, favor the familiar. And imagine...imagine what it is like regarding our parents, our ancestors... to keep the old records, to set up a room like it was, to find comfort in continuity, satisfaction in stability. We honor and preserve, lest a changing world sweep away everything our parents cherished.

Now imagine a queen, who comes into power, and who rules by responding to new needs with different answers than were heard before. How is this, how can this be, honoring the memory of her parents? But what if she knew them so well... that she felt able to separate their values from the particular settings and circumstances in which they were formed. How can the new honor the old? Only by understanding that what is old and cherished... was once new and radical itself.

Yizkor. We are here to remember. To remember, but also to live. We honor our loved ones in many ways. Sometimes it is by keeping alive what was. Other times it is by knowing the spirit, and making adjustments. Both have their place. And both are forms of *hazkarah*, of sacred memory.

“You, who are on the road...” “We are travelers on the same road, that leads to the same end.” What is it, then, that we value? What is the code, that we inherit, that we pass on, that we can live by?

We continue with *Seder Hazkarat Neshamot*, our Memorial Service of Yizkor...