



## Yeridat HaDorot – Are the generations declining or ascending? Rabbi Josh Levy & Cantor Sarah Grabiner, Shavuot 5780

### The classic articulations of the idea:

#### Bavli, Shabbat 112b

אמר רבי זירא אמר רבא בר זימונא אם ראשונים בני מלאכים אנו בני אנשים  
ואם ראשונים בני אנשים אנו כחמורים ולא כחמורו של רבי חנינא בן דוסא ושל רבי פנחס  
בן יאיר אלא כשאר חמורים:

Rabbi Zeira said that Rava bar Zimuna said: If the earlier generations were the children of angels, we are the children of men. And if the earlier generations were the children of men, we are like donkeys. And not like the donkeys of Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa or Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, but like other donkeys.

#### Yerushalmi Gittin 6:7

רבי כד הוה בעי מקשייה על דרבי יוסי אמר אנן עליבייה מקשייא על דרבי יוסי. שכשם  
לבין קדשי הקדשים לבין חולי חולין כך בין דורינו לדורו של רבי יוסי. אמר רבי  
ישמעאל בי רבי יוסי כשם שבין זהב לעפר כך בין דורינו לדורו של אבא.

When Rabbi (Yehudah HaNasi) wanted to dispute an opinion of Rabbi Yose, he said,  
“Should we lower ones dispute an opinion of Rabbi Yose? Just as the difference between  
consecrated things and unconsecrated things, so is the difference between our generation  
and the generation of Rabbi Yose.”

Rabbi Yishmael the son of Rabbi Yose said, “Just as the difference between gold and dirt,  
so is the difference between our generation and the generation of father”

#### Yerushalmi Shekalim 5:1

ר' חגי בשם ר' שמואל בר נחמן הראשונים חרשו וזרעו ניכשו כיסחו עדרו קצרו עמרו  
דשו זרו בררו טחנו הרקידו לשו קיטפו ואפו ואנו אין לנו מה לאכול  
ר' אבא בר יונה זמינא בשם ר' זעירא אין הוון קדמאין מלאכין אנן בני אנש ואין הוון  
בני אנש אנן חמרין  
אמר רבי מנא בההיא שעתא אמרין אפילו כחמרתיה דר' פינחס בן יאיר לא אידמינון

Rabbi Haggai said in the name of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman, “The earlier generations  
ploughed, sowed, weeded, cut, hoed, harvested, sheaves, threshed, squeezed, separated,  
ground, sifted, kneaded, smoothed and baked, and we have nothing to eat.”

Rabbi Abba bar Yonah Zemina said in the name of Rabbi Zeira, “If the earlier generations  
were angels, we are human beings. If they were human beings, we are donkeys.”

Rabbi Mana said, “At that time, they said: We are not even like the donkey of Rabbi  
Pinchas ben Yair.”

## Aspects of our inferiority in the Bavli

### Eruvin 53a

אמר רבי יוחנן לבן של ראשונים כפתחו של אולם ושל אחרונים כפתחו של היכל ואנו כמלא נקב מחט סידקית

Rabbi Yochanan said: The hearts [here meaning minds/wisdom] of the earlier generations were like the entrance to the Hall [of the Temple – according to Rashi, twenty cubits wide], and that of the later generations were like the entrance to the chamber [of the Temple - ten cubits wide].

And we are like the entire eye of a needle used to mend tears [i.e. an extremely fine needle].

### Brachot 35b

אמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי יהודה ברבי אלעאי: בא וראה שלא כדורות הראשונים דורות האחרונים.

דורות הראשונים עשו תורתן קבע ומלאכתן עראי, זו וזו נתקיימה בידן.

דורות האחרונים שעשו מלאכתן קבע ותורתן עראי, זו וזו לא נתקיימה בידן.

Rabba bar bar Chana said that Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yehudah son of Rabbi El'ai: Come and see that the later generations are not like the earlier generations.

The earlier generations made their Torah their permanent occupation and their work incidental, and this and were sustained for them.

The later generations made their work their permanent occupation and their Torah incidental, and neither this nor that was sustained for them.

ואמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי יהודה ברבי אלעאי: בא וראה שלא כדורות הראשונים דורות האחרונים.

דורות הראשונים היו מכניסין פירותיהן דרך טרקסמון כדי לחייבן במעשר,

דורות האחרונים מכניסין פירותיהן דרך גגות, דרך חצרות, דרך קרפופות, כדי לפטורן מן המעשר.

דאמר רבי ינאי: אין הטבל מתחייב במעשר עד שיראה פני הבית, שנאמר: "בערתי הקדש מן הבית".

Rabba bar bar Chana said that Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yehudah son of Rabbi El'ai: Come and see that the later generations are not like the earlier generations.

The earlier generations would bring their crops into their courtyards via a route that would subject them to tithes.

The later generations would bring their crops via the roofs, courtyards and storage yards so as to exempt them from tithes.

For Rabbi Yannai said: Untithed produce does not become subject to tithe until it sees the front of the house, as it is stated I HAVE REMOVED THE CONSECRATED FROM THE HOUSE

(Deuteronomy 26:13).

אמר ליה רב פפא לאביי: מאי שנא ראשונים דאתרחיש להו ניסא,  
ומאי שנא אנן דלא מתרחיש לן ניסא?

אי משום תנויי, בשני דרב יהודה כולי תנויי בנזיקין הוה, ואנן קא מתנינן שיתא סדרי.  
וכי הוה מטי רב יהודה בעוקצין, האשה שכובשת ירק בקדרה, ואמרי לה זיתים שכבשן  
בטרפיהן טהורים, אמר: הויות דרב ושמואל קא חזינא הכא. ואנן קא מתנינן בעוקצין  
תליסר מתיבתא, ואילו רב יהודה כי הוה שליף חד מסאניה, אתי מטרא, ואנן קא  
מצערינן נפשין ומצוח קא צוחינן, ולית דמשגח בן.  
אמר ליה: קמאי הוו קא מסרי נפשיהו אקדושת השם, אנן לא מסרינן נפשין אקדושת  
השם.

כי הא דרב אדא בר אהבה חזייה לההיא כותית דהות לבישא כרבלתא בשוקא. סבר דבת  
ישראל היא, קם קרעיה מינה. אגלאי מילתא דכותית היא. שיימוה בארבע מאה זוזי.  
אמר לה: מה שמך? אמרה ליה: מתון. אמר לה, מתון — מתון ארבע מאה זוזי שויא.

Rav Pappa said to Abaye: What was different about the earlier generations, for whom miracles occurred and what is different about us, for whom miracles do not occur?

If you say it is because of study; in the time of Rav Yehudah all of their learning was about the order of *Nezikin*, while we learn all six orders! And, when Rav Yehudah would reach in tractate *uktzin* (stalks) 'If a woman is preserving a vegetable in a pot', and some say 'olives preserved with their leaves are ritually pure', he would say, "I see here the disputes between Rav and Shmuel". And we learn thirteen versions of *uktzin*!

Yet [when there was a drought], Rav Yehuda would remove one of his shoes and the rain would fall, whereas we afflict ourselves and cry out and no one pays attention to us.

He [Abaye] said to him: The earlier generations give themselves utterly to the sanctification of God's name, but we do not give ourselves utterly to the sanctification of God's name.

[The gemara gives an example] Like this incident of Rav Adda bar Ahavah who saw a Cuthean woman wearing a *karbalta* [a red headdress] in the marketplace. He thought that she was Jewish, and stood up and ripped it from her. It was discovered that she was a Cuthean [so he had to pay a fine]. They evaluated her [loss] at four hundred *zuz*. He said to her, 'What is your name?' She replied, 'Matun'. He said to her, 'Matun matun was worth four hundred *zuz*' [the Aramaic word for two hundred is Matan].

*This tradition about Rav Yehudah, his studies and the efficacy of his prayer, is repeated in Tractate Taanit 24a-b in the context of Rabbah's unanswered prayers for rain. He concludes...*

אי משום עובדא אי איכא דחזא מידי לימא אבל מה יעשו גדולי הדור שאין דורן דומה  
יפה

If [the difference between the generations] is because of our deeds, if there is anyone who has seen me do anything improper, let him say so. But what can the great ones of a generation do when their generation does not appear favourable?

## Temurah 15b-16a

תנן התם משמת יוסף בן יועזר איש צרידה ויוסף בן יוחנן איש ירושלים בטלו  
האשכולות איש שהכל בו  
ואמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל כל אשכולות שעמדו להן לישראל מימות משה עד שמת  
יוסף בן יועזר היו למדין תורה כמשה רבינו מכאן ואילך לא היו למדין תורה כמשה  
רבינו  
והאמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל שלשת אלפים הלכות נשתכחו בימי אבלו של משה  
דאישתכח להו אשתכח ודגמירן להו הו גמירי כמשה רבינו  
והא תניא משמת משה אם רבו מטמאין טמאו אם רבו טהורין טיהרו  
ליבא דאימעייט מיגמר הו גמירי להו כמשה רבינו  
במתניתא תנא כל אשכולות שעמדו לישראל מימות משה עד שמת יוסף בן יועזר איש  
צרידה לא היה בהם שום דופי מכאן ואילך היה בהן שום דופי

We learned there (in a Mishnah – *Sotah* 9:10): From the time when Yosef ben Yo'ezer of Tzereidah and Yosef ben Yochanan, leader of Jerusalem, died, the *eshkolot* [clusters] ceased.

[An explanation of *eshkolot*] - *ish shehakol bo* – a person in whom is everything.

And Rav Yehudah said that Shmuel said: All the *eshkolot* who stood for Israel, from the days of Moses until the death of Yosef ben Yo'ezer, would study Torah in the manner of Moses, our teacher. From that time on they would not study Torah in the manner of Moses, our teacher.

[The Gemara questions this tradition] Didn't Rav Yehudah say that Shmuel said: Three thousand *halachot* were forgotten during the days of mourning for Moses?

[The Gemara answers its own question] Those that they forgot were forgotten, but those that they [still had and] studied, they would study in the manner of Moses, our teacher.

[The Gemara questions again] But isn't it taught in a *baraita*: From the death of Moses, if the majority deemed an item impure, they established it as impure, and if the majority deemed an item pure, they established it as pure.

Their minds were limited [with regard to the *halachot* that had been forgotten] but when they studied [the remembered *halachot*], they would study them in the manner of Moses, our teacher.

It was taught in a *baraita*: All the *eshkolot* who stood for Israel from the days of Moses until the death of Yosef ben Yo'ezer had no flaw in them. From that time on they had flaws in them...

## Sukkah 28a

תנו רבנן שמונים תלמידים היו לו להלל הזקן שלשים מהן ראויים שתשרה עליהן שכינה  
כמשה רבינו ושלשים מהן ראויים שתעמוד להם חמה כיהושע בן נון עשרים בינונים  
גדול שבכולן יונתן בן עוזיאל קטן שבכולן רבן יוחנן בן זכאי

The Rabbis taught in a *baraita*: Hillel the Elder had eighty students. Thirty of them were worthy that the Divine Presence should rest upon them as it did upon Moses our teacher, and thirty of them were worthy that the sun should stand still for them as it did for Joshua bin Nun, and twenty were between the other two. The greatest of all the students was Yonatan ben Uzziel, and the least of them was Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai.

## Other voices in Rabbinic Literature

### Menachot 29b

הלך וישב בסוף שמונה שורות, ולא היה יודע מה הן אומרים, תשש כחו כיון שהגיע לדבר אחד, אמרו לו תלמידיו: רבי, מנין לך? אמר להן: הלכה למשה מסיני, נתיישבה דעתו.

[Moses found himself in the class of Rabbi Akiva]

He went and sat at the end of eight rows [of students]. He did not understand what they were saying and his strength ebbed away.

When [Akiva] came to a certain point, his students said to him, "Teacher, from where do you know this?"

Akiva replied, "It is a law [given] to Moses at Sinai" (*Halachah l'Moshe miSinai*).

Moses' mind was calmed.

### Chagigah 3a

אמר להם: מה חידוש היה בבית המדרש היום?  
אמרו לו: תלמידך אנו, ומימיך אנו שותין.  
אמר להם: אף על פי כן, אי אפשר לבית המדרש בלא חידוש

[Rabbi Yehoshua speaking to his students]

He said to them, "What *hiddush* (innovation) was there in the Beit Midrash today?"

They said, "We are your students and we only drink from your water."

He said to them, "That may be so, but it is impossible for the Beit Midrash to exist without innovation".

### Mishnah Avot 6:2

בְּכֹל יוֹם וְיוֹם בֵּית קוֹל יוֹצֵאת מִהַר חוֹרֵב

Every day a voice goes out from Mount Horeb [Sinai]

The Shelah (Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, 1555-1630)

Commenting on the use of the present tense above

We find that God gave the Torah and He continues to give the Torah at every moment.

## **Modern Voices**

**Samuel Holdheim (1806-1860)**

quoted in W. G. Plaut, *The Rise of Reform Judaism* (NY, 1963), 123.

The Talmud speaks with the ideology of its own time, and for that time it was right. I speak from the higher ideology of my time, and for this age I am right.

### **1937 - The Columbus Platform**

In view of the changes that have taken place in the modern world and the consequent need of stating anew the teachings of Reform Judaism, the Central Conference of American Rabbis makes the following declaration of principle...

Judaism is the historical religious experience of the Jewish people... Reform Judaism recognizes the principle of progressive development in religion and consciously applies this principle to spiritual as well as to cultural and social life.

Revelation is a continuous process, confined to no one group and to no one age. Israel's ever-growing consciousness of God and of the moral law. Each age has the obligation to adapt the teachings of the Torah to its basic needs in consonance with the genius of Judaism.

### **1976 - Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective (San Francisco)**

Torah as "God's ongoing revelation to our people and the record of our people's ongoing relationship with God."

**Rabbi Eugene Borowitz**

***Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew* (JPS, 1991)**

No one writing today can hope to command the respect the authors of the Bible rightly continue to elicit... we should substantially rely on their delineation of proper covenantal existence. The biblical and rabbinic texts have every Jewish right to exert a higher criticism on the lives of each new generation of Jews... [yet] in one critical religious respect we stand apart from prior generations: our conviction that we must exercise considerable self-determination." (291)

**Rabbi Aaron Panken, 'Torah's Progressive Truth',  
<https://www.thetorah.com/article/torat-emet-torahs-progressive-truth> (2015)**

[The term] Progressive Revelation [was] drawn originally from the neo-Kantian Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842-1918). Cohen wrote in his *magnum opus*, *The Religion of Reason*, that Revelation is like Creation—it is a continuous, enduring process that began at Sinai but is “implanted in the heart” of every Jew who uses his (or her) divinely given facilities of reason in all times and places. (Cohen H., 1972, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan, 92) God did not reveal the Torah once, rather revelation happened then in a unique and vital communication between God and humanity that our ancestors recorded, and through the use of our God-given reason and interpretive abilities continues to happen now as we study, interpret and apply the words of our most sacred text in changing intellectual and religious contexts...

It is not sufficient to see Torah as static, limited and completed—as True—for such Truth cannot always make the jump to new generations, and a True Torah must ultimately become outdated and irrelevant as ideas change and society advances. Rather, the beauty of a true Torah is in its reinterpretation and growth in every new time and place, based on prior Truths, yet continuous and ongoing in its path-breaking brilliance and innovation. It is only through this careful balance that we ensure that the Torah is, was and will always be true.

**Tamar Ross  
*Expanding the Palace of Torah* (Brandeis University Press, 2004)**

Abraham Isaac Kook “discover[ed] the ultimate meaning of Torah’s word in the inevitable dialectic between the original revelation at Sinai and the progressive unfolding of history and human understanding... heaven-sent tools for revealing God’s will” (164)

Revelation as “a cumulative process: a dynamic unfolding of the original Torah transmitted at Sinai that reveals in time its ultimate significance;” not a “one-time affair.” (197)

“[The question of feminism’s interaction with Judaism...] forces us to confront the relationship between the divine word and human interpretation and to ascertain the extent to which a religion based on the notion of a singular foundational revelation (the revelation at Sinai) can accommodate changes in the evolving moral sensibilities of its adherents.” (xvi)

The scaffolding metaphor:

- We must see ourselves “not as superior moral beings looking back upon morally depraved forebears, but as dwarfs who can see more than the giant simply because they stand on his shoulders.” (208)
- “Tradition is the special way our parents and grandparents spoke to God.” (211)
- “Only when we have a past from which to draw and a future toward which to strive can there be a meaningful present.” (249)

**Rabbi Josh Levy**

**Do we believe in Decline or Progress? October 2015**

[Yeridat HaDorot] is more than just a romanticization of the past. It serves as a handcuff that ties us to the forms of religious life that we inherit. The idea that past generations were spiritually, religiously, superior to all who came after them lends itself to an inherent conservatism. It says that the right to be subversive, to be radical, to overturn Torah, was the preserve of a particular period in time – that of the early Sages. It says that later generations do not have the right to innovation or creativity, to be lenient in our decision making. Our religious life is limited to a role as inheritors of the decisions and interpretations of the past.

Interestingly, a parallel argument took place in the medieval church: between those who believed they had a right to innovation and those who believed that this was the preserve of earlier authorities; between those who believed that it was possible to look again at the sources, and those who believed that all should be seen through the lens of earlier authorities.

Which means that, bizarrely, my own view is best expressed (save for the gendered language) by an 11th/12th Century Benedictine theologian, Rupert of Deutz: “Who can be properly indignant,” he wrote, “when, after their fathers before them dug one or two holes, their sons and heirs dig yet more by their own labour in their common property.”

I am proud that we continue, through our own labour, to be diggers in Torah and Rabbinic Literature – our common property. We continue to engage with the full breadth of Jewish tradition, applying the values, learning and understandings that we have accumulated over hundreds of years, in search of truth and meaning. We are the antidote to yeridat hadorot – believers not in the decline of the generations, but in the possibility of ascent.