

לְדוֹר וָדוֹר

L'dor v'dor /

From generation to generation

How legacy challenges us

Refining Torah In Our Time

Hannah Dresner

As I contemplate generational lineage in the advent of Shavuot, when we relive the origin of our inheritance with the giving of Torah at Sinai, I am drawn to the work of Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, who lived and wrote during the late 19th century, and was known as the *S'fat Emet*, the name of his most voluminous work. He teaches, in his commentary on the Torah portion *Emor*, that God's acts of speech, which both brought the world into being through Creation and mandated our social structure through commandments, are, in the words of Psalm 12, "as pure as refined silver." But what makes them even more precious, indeed seven times more precious in the eyes of God, is what we do with God's words as we draw them through the refining fire of our humanity, discovering the holy in creation and expressing God's commandments as we are able, in our own ways, reflective of life in our own time. In other words, we further refine the pure silver of God's word in every generation.

The *Sfat Emet* goes so far as to say that "not only did Adonai, The Blessed One, give Torah to the children of Israel, the Blessed One literally planted the power of Torah within us, so that we can independently renew words of Torah and [re]configure the letters of the Torah!"*

The nature of the relationship between God and Israel is exemplified by verses the rabbis identify as marital vows: "You have declared *Adonai* to be your God," and "*Adonai* has declared you to be God's special people." (Deuteronomy 26:17, 18) If God and Israel are lovers, our pillow talk is the exchange of Torah. At Sinai, God speaks Torah to us, and, in every generation, we return the flow of God's love by listening actively and answering empathically, as any lover would. Our answer comes in the form of loving pushback as we consider how best to embrace and enhance our beloved's vision of our bond, our life together, and the sort of family we're going to be to one another.

L'dor v'dor can mean what we inherit from our parents and then transform and pass on to our children for their further refinement as they create and reconfigure — in the words of the *Sfat Emet* — new Torah. My grandparents lived lives of mitzvot according to the customs of their Orthodox German heritage, but they embraced Western garb, took advanced degrees in universities, and left the *kippah* at home when entering the workplace. And they taught their Torah to my mother, an American who became a devout Conservative Jew, who let go of various strictures while consciously enhancing the integral nature of Shabbat as an island in time.

Would my Judaism be recognizable to my grandparents? What would they think of the painted eggs on my seder table? Or my embrace of non-Jews coming forward for group *aliyot* in the spiritual community I lead? What would they think of my feminine rabbinate, altogether? So much appears different, but the thread that connects it all is that my children seek their Jewish authenticity with the same seriousness as their ancestors.

God gifted Torah to all generations at Sinai, *l'dor v'dor*. The power of Torah is in us, and God is aroused and enlivened by our expression of it, not when we feed God's words right back in blind obedience or when we dutifully repeat the words of our ancestors, but when we express our relationship with God by speaking our own versions of Torah: Torah that we understand, live, and transmit. God doesn't want a conversation frozen in the era of the great rabbis of the Sanhedrin; God wants the juiciness of a living love.

Rabbi **Hannah Dresner** received *smikhah* from ALEPH and serves as the spiritual leader of Or Shalom in Vancouver, BC. She is a fellow with Rabbis Without Borders and participates in the Clergy Leadership Program of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality.

**Rebbe Nachman's commentary on parashat Emor, Likkutei MoHaRan 5634/1874 p. 168b (author's translation).*



Art by Camille Fox
"The Walk to School"
Oil on linen, 102cm x 84cm

Sally Gottesman is sponsoring this issue addressing family legacy to honor the memory of her father, Jerry Gottesman, z"l.

Please see pages 5–7 for *Consider and Converse*, our guide to this issue

NiSh'ma

On this page, we offer three takes on a passage of Mishnah that teaches us we are all descended from the same person, the original "Adam." Our commentators wrestle with what that inheritance means for Jews and how we shape that mythology going forward. Our online version is interactive, and we welcome your comments. —S.B.



Lev Meiorowitz Nelson: This text reminds us that our generations stretch all the way back to the first human, Adam. And it teaches us that my ancestor was no better than your ancestor. A basic commonality underlies all humanity and demands equal rights in a way that is fundamentally at odds with racism, classism, and xenophobia.

Contextually, the text reminds us that our greatest moral achievements come from places of tragedy. We find these verses in the midst of the Mishnah's discussion of capital punishment: A severe crime has been committed, leaving lives devastated and a community torn asunder. Out of this grief — the Mishnah does not share America's blasé approach to execution — comes a series of grand statements about the immense worth and unique value of every human life.

Similarly (though on a much bigger scale), the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was born out of the Holocaust and developed along with a new global consensus that the age of sovereignty — in which a state could do *whatever* it wished within its own borders — must give way to a new era, acknowledging a higher moral authority. Now, when governments commit atrocities, we at least have language for holding them accountable. This "naming" is our birthright. Adam gave names to all the animals (Gen. 2:19-20) so he could know what they were. We, the children of Adam, *b'nei Adam*, give names to everything, including our crimes, so we can deal with them.

Rabbi **Lev Meiorowitz Nelson** is director of education at T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. Ordained by the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, he was honored in 2017 by the Covenant Foundation as an outstanding emerging educator with the Pomegranate Prize.



Koach Baruch Frazier: I recently purchased a DNA kit after reviewing my father's DNA results last December. I was so excited to find out where on the continent of Africa I originated and what other nations my family might be connected to. Knowing one's ancestry is powerful and provides the opportunity to explore one's heritage and the legacies of previous generations.

To be sure, though, using a classification such as the historic "one-drop rule," which aimed to define racial purity, white supremacy culture has used ancestry to perpetuate systems of discrimination and oppression. This rule asserted, if you have at least one ancestor from Africa, you are considered black, no matter your skin tone or heritage.

Fortunately, our sages left us with a blueprint that leads us toward a more inclusive understanding of our ancestry. We are indeed descendants of one common ancestor, Adam — the first human. And, as Rabbi Lev Meiorowitz Nelson points out, our common ancestral rootedness demands equality.

And yet, in order for this equality to exist, we have to find ways to affirm this common humanity in each other. We must resist the legacy of white supremacy: a culture of hatred, isolation, and utter disregard for one another. We can resist by reminding ourselves of our shared ancestry, a fact that scientists confirm through our mitochondrial (maternal) DNA, offering a legacy of liberation rooted in real and meaningful connection, compassion, and dignity.

Koach Baruch Frazier holds a doctorate in audiology from Central Michigan University. He is a musician, healer, and writer who spends his days helping people reconnect with the world around them through better hearing and by providing love and support through revolutionary listening.



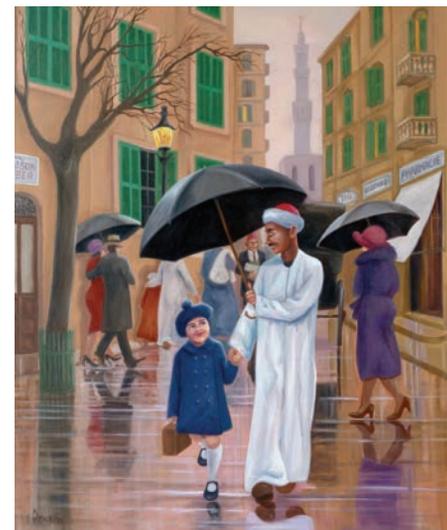
Leah Vincent: My father, an ultra-Orthodox rabbi, taught me dignity, loyalty, and a love of stories. But, as a parent, he had his limitations. When he couldn't accept my independent life, I adopted new fathers to guide me, drawn from my college education in psychology and the music that gave me comfort in a lonely secular world: Carl Jung advised me on the psyche, Leonard Cohen on the Jewish soul. Their calls for passion and emotional openness wove into my father's lessons to make a richer paternal heritage.

A personal "mythology" like this — a simple, stirring imaginative narrative — can be strong enough to shape a life. On the societal scale, it can shape a culture.

When reality feels bleak, mythology can be a mental scaffold, allowing us to envision and then embody a story line we might not yet know how to live. As Rabbi Meiorowitz Nelson points out, the myth of a common father, Adam, was used amid tragedy to envision a new norm in which every life had inalienable value.

Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. once transformed our nation with this kind of epic storytelling. He imagined a time when the *sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood*. In this perilous moment, I hope we will combat stories of hate and fear by building grand new tales of hope, justice, and a universal family.

Leah Vincent is the author of *Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation After My Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood* and the co-author of *Legends of the Talmud*. She holds a masters degree in Public Policy from Harvard University and has been named to the *Forward* 50 and the *Jewish Week's* 36 Under 36.



"The Walk to School" by Camille Fox

Jewish sensibilities are approaches to living and learning that permeate Jewish culture. The ideas, values, emotions, and behaviors they express — emanating from Jewish history, stories, and sources — provide inspiration and guidance that help us to respond creatively and thoughtfully to life's challenges and opportunities. Sensibilities are culturally informed senses or memes. This month, *Sh'ma Now* explores the Jewish sensibility of legacy, how each generation impacts — in vital and profound ways — the next generation.

Healing Intergenerational Wounds

Mona DeKoven Fishbane

A 40-year-old man goes home to visit his parents for Thanksgiving. As he enters the front door, he is transformed into a powerless 5-year-old; his family reenacts familiar scenarios, and he falls into old patterns of reactivity. How do layers of maturity melt away when we enter our parents' orbit, leaving us exposed to old vulnerabilities and wounds?

Neuroscience offers some perspective. The amygdala, deep in the brain, is constantly scanning for danger; when sensing a threat, the fight-or-flight response is set off. The amygdala encodes emotional memories; a parents' raised eyebrow now may activate old memories of disapproval and agitate us without our knowing why.

Many individuals harbor complaints about their childhood; some become chronically stuck in resentful, blaming positions with parents. Intergenerational family theorist Ivan Boszmormenyi-Nagy notes that we may try to "collect damages" for old wounds, but "at the wrong address" — for example, from a spouse or child. We then perpetuate intergenerational cycles of hurt and disappointment. But rather than being victims of our past, we can "grow up" our relationships with parents and siblings and become authors of our responses. How we deal with past hurts and legacies will shape how we deal with our children, and what legacies we pass on to them.

To counter the victim/blame position cycle, we need to develop more adult, differentiated relationships with parents and siblings, bring thoughtfulness to emotional reactivity, and establish healthy boundaries. In cases of extreme abuse or current dangerous behavior, our engagement may be limited, based on safety. Understanding or contextualizing egregious parental behavior is not the same as condoning it. Abuse is never acceptable, but we can choose how to position ourselves vis-à-vis

our past and current relationships.

Shifting perspective to see parents as real people, not through the lens of the needy child, can be transformative. Rather than seeing parents with a hierarchical view (they have the power, we are powerless), see them with a generational view: Our parents were once young and are managing the best they can, given their upbringing; we may be raising our own children and making our own mistakes, hoping someday they'll forgive us.

The fifth commandment, "honor your father and mother," comes with rewards for the child who honors — "that you may live long upon the earth" and "that it may go well for you." The Talmud offers compelling anecdotes of the difficulties involved in fulfilling this commandment, and the merits of doing so.

Boszmormenyi-Nagy claims that we owe our aging parents a debt of "filial loyalty," ensuring they are cared for. (Maimonides, the 12th-century Jewish philosopher, notes that, if caring directly for parents causes the adult child anguish, others can be enlisted to provide the care.) Boszmormenyi-Nagy suggests that if we are trapped in anger and don't find a constructive way to repay the debt, we may become mired in "invisible loyalties" — negative, self-defeating replays of our stuckness with our parents in our other relationships. In order to parent well, we need to be unburdened by invisible loyalties and old resentments. Like the rabbi, he points to the connection between honoring parents and living a generative life.

The old nature vs. nurture debate has been resolved: It is both/and. We're born with genetic tendencies; how we are raised shapes those tendencies. Parent-child interactions create neuronal circuits in the young child's brain and affect the expression of genes, turning them on or off — epigenetic changes that can be transmitted intergenerationally. Abuse, neglect, and trauma negatively affect the child's growing brain. Nurture matters.

Although we are molded by genetics and early family experience, we are capable of growing beyond old constraints — thanks to neuroplasticity (the ability of the brain to change), which extends throughout life. We can make conscious choices to break the chain of hurt and trauma. By repositioning ourselves vis-à-vis our past, we can author our present and shape the future. We stand between the generation before us and the generation that follows; how we stand determines what we will transmit to our children.

Dr. **Mona DeKoven Fishbane**, a clinical psychologist, is the author of *Loving with the Brain in Mind: Neurobiology and Couple Therapy*. She received the 2017 Family Psychologist of the Year Award from the American Psychological Association (Society for Couple & Family Psychology), and can be found at monafishbane.com.

Revealing New Facets of the Divine

Jhos Singer

Several preoccupations of traditional Judaism — continuity, authenticity, scholarship, survival — are bundled into the notion of *l'dor v'dor* (from generation to generation). It is a phrase uttered on a daily basis in communal worship; it has become an embodied ritual at *b'nei mitzvah* ceremonies when a Torah is passed through the generations to the newest member of the adult community; and it is the idea that underpins fear of interfaith marriages. Surely Judaism's inherent beauty is enough to keep the flames alive without needing to rely on strict lineage. So why does Judaism continue to hammer on this idea of *l'dor v'dor*?

The Babylonian Talmud (Menachot 29b) offers a brilliant and illuminating midrash that further complicates this question. Moses ascends to heaven and finds God attaching crowns to the letters of the Torah. Moses asks: "Who is delaying your hand?" He is asking: "Why are you taking precious time to add silly flourishes and unnecessary ornamentation?" God responds, "These crowns are for the person who will find meaning that everyone else misses." Moses says, "Well, I'd like to meet that guy." Suddenly, Moses has that opportunity when he is transported to Rabbi Akiva's house of study. Initially, sitting at the end of the eighth row, Moses listens but doesn't understand R. Akiva's teaching. Soon, he hears Akiva's students asking Akiva about the origins and sources of the lesson, and Akiva replies, "This is the law given to Moses on Mount Sinai."

Between Moses' death in 1250 b.c.e. and the rise of Akiva's school in 100 c.e., the Torah and Judaism transform and evolve. Akiva's Torah had become unrecognizable to Moses. But eventually, Moses sees what he had originally missed, and takes comfort knowing that Akiva's Torah is both rooted in and departing from his legacy.

Akiva was the perfect candidate to hold this role in the tradition. Midrashic accounts suggest that he came from a family with neither wealth nor distinguished lineage,

and some stories hint that his parents may have been converts and descendants of General Sisera, the Canaanite general who was fatally stabbed by Yael. (Judges 4–5) The details of Akiva's life are the stuff of legend, interpreted and reinterpreted, sometimes unrecognizable to historians of later generations. Although the genetic connection between the two men is suspect, the midrashic tradition ties their legacies by reinventing the mercenary and violent General Sisera as the progenitor of refined and wise Torah scholars. Each generation inched around a 180-degree arc until the mercenary becomes a sage. And Akiva and Sisera share lives that were accomplished, powerful, and ultimately tragic.

Parents may consciously try to transmit their values, habits, and beliefs to their children; certainly, they will transmit genetic talents, vulnerabilities, and tendencies. Despite the best efforts of parents, children may depart from the path foreseen for them. Similarly, no matter how much we look, sound, or digest like our parents, we may live lives utterly foreign to them. This isn't a problem if there is trust that each life, regardless of the one out of which it emerged, is uniquely positioned to reveal a facet of the Divine. *L'dor v'dor* is merely a delivery system, not a duplication service. And no matter how you arrive in the community, Judaism sees you as a child of Abraham and Sarah; *l'dor v'dor* isn't necessarily linear. All of us are given genetic traits that are influenced by our environment; each of us becomes a link in the chain between wisdom and biology.

L'dor v'dor as a spiritual practice is about manifesting trust, love, and hope for generations we will never meet. Moses got a look into the future that we will not.

Perhaps our DNA contains crowns that God wrote into our bodies, and, like the Torah, it may take several generations for one to arrive who will express the meaning of those flourishes and adornments. Maybe *l'dor v'dor* is more a wild, unknowable adventure than an assurance of a predictable Jewish future. *L'dor v'dor* ensures a nuanced and layered unfolding of our legacy. A pathway is built generation by generation, with destinations and stops along the way transforming our ideas, insights, and forms into unrecognizable futures.

Jhos Singer is the Maggid for the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco and Chochmat HaLev, a Center for Jewish Spirituality in Berkeley, Calif. His teaching can be found in the anthologies *Balancing on the Mechitza* and *Torah Queeries*, and at elitalks.org.

Note to Self: Letters that Heal

Elana Zaiman

In episode 401 of *This American Life*, David Segal interviewed Rebecca Gee, whose mother, Elizabeth, a devout Mormon, had died of cancer in 1991 when Rebecca was sixteen. Elizabeth, knowing she would not be part of her daughter's growing up, decided to write Rebecca letters that she asked her husband to mail every year on Rebecca's birthday. Initially comforted by her mother's letters, Rebecca found that, over the years, they were not always easy to read. As she matured, she found herself less connected to her Mormon upbringing, so when she read her mother's words telling her to remain true to her Mormon faith, Rebecca felt a moral dilemma. Her devout mother's words did not speak to who she was, and she felt that, though her mother had died, she was still disappointing her.

I mention this story as a cautionary tale for those of us writing to our children, grandchildren, and others to share our values, wisdom, guidance, and love.

This tradition of writing our legacies is not new to us as Jews. In medieval times, parents wrote *tze-vah-oat* (commandments) in the form of letters to their children to pass on their ethical values and ritual precepts, their Torah. These letters, referred to as "ethical wills," were often left to be read after the author's death, like the letters Rebecca received from her mother.

So, how do we share our wisdom, experience, and love in ways that do not make our loved ones uncomfortable? I learned from my father that how we show up on the page matters. When I was fourteen, he handed me an ethical will he had written to me and my three younger siblings. In this letter, he showed up not as a rabbi directing us but as a father writing from his heart, putting himself on the page in a more vulnerable way than he had ever spoken to us in person.

He stated his hopes: "Respect one another, even if love is not always possible. Take care of each other . . . always." He wrote about disagreements: "As you grew older, we differed concerning substantive matters, and I was proud of how you all stood your ground, even when I attempted to intimidate." He wrote about how he might pick on us when we behaved like him, "at least . . . those aspects of myself that I liked least." He challenged us to recognize our own weaknesses so we could turn them into strengths. He asked us to remain proud Jews,

to care for our mother, and to say kaddish for him, when he died.

My father wrote as if this were his last letter to us, stating what he most wanted and needed to say. This letter changed my life. Even today, over four decades later, I return to it when I feel the need to hear my father's voice and his wisdom in a deep and loving way.

My father's letter motivated me to write honest and vulnerable letters to my son, Gabe. One in particular stands out. After visiting Gabe in Israel during his sophomore year of high school, I wrote to him to reflect on and reiterate a conversation we had on a Shabbat afternoon. My letter spoke not only about the content of our talk but also about the fact that we had such a meaningful and honest conversation, and that I hoped these conversations would continue. I was in the midst of a midlife struggle, and I had shared some of my life learnings with him. He, in turn, had shared some of his life learnings with me. It was during this conversation that I encouraged him to live his own life, not the life he believed others wanted him to live.

We can share our wisdom, experience, guidance, and love in many ways. Letters are particularly impactful because we can read them on our own time. We can return to them when our souls need to hear the messages contained within, and we can hold them not only in our hearts but also in our hands. Letters like these create opportunities for conversations, and they are invitations for both readers and writers to learn more about themselves, each other, and the relationship they share. This learning gives us the chance to deepen, heal, strengthen, and uplift our relationships while we're still here to enjoy them.

Rabbi **Elana Zaiman** is the author of *The Forever Letter*, about bringing ethical wills into the 21st century.

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"Consider and Converse: *L'dor v'dor*" is a guide that walks you through this issue, inspires reflections, prompts questions, and provides ways to connect this reading with other meaningful experiences. It is found online at www.forward.com/shma-now.

Consider & Converse

A Guide to 'L'dor v'dor' —
'From Generation to
Generation'

Introduction

Sh'ma Now conversations on a single theme rooted in Jewish tradition and the contemporary moment. At the heart of this issue of *Sh'ma Now* is the Jewish sensibility of "l'dor v'dor — what we pass from generation to generation." The notion of transmission is complex and these essays both shed light on and further complicate the idea of transmitting values from one generation to the next generations. Inheritance, legacy, transmitting values are all ideas that can be charged with deep emotion, pain, and also—of course—love and generosity. As we learn more about the workings of the brain, we are learning that trauma passes down from generation to generation in ways similar to the color of our hair and eyes and our temperaments. And as parents, we dream of instilling in our children the values that shaped us, and we also know that our children will explore and discover and hold onto and refine values as they understand their own lives. Even Torah and the wisdom of our ancestors—what we've inherited—is approached and interpreted with the artful eye of discovery. This is what it means to create a legacy for the next generation and beyond.

Sh'ma Now has never viewed learning or "meaning-making" as solely an individual activity. That's why we have included this guide, which is specifically designed to help you to consider the idea of going forth independently or with others, formally and informally.

How to Begin

This guide offers a variety of suggestions, including activities and prompts for individual contemplation and informal or structured conversations. We suggest that you use this guide to share reflections and thoughts over a Shabbat meal, or, for those who are more adventurous, to lead a planned, structured conversation, inviting a small group of friends and family to your home or to a coffee shop. If you would like more information about ways in which this journal can be used, please contact Susan Berrin, *Sh'ma Now* editor-in-chief, at SBerrin@shma.com. You can also print out a PDF file of the entire issue at <http://forward.com/shma-now/>.

Guidelines for Discussion

If you wish to hold a structured conversation, the following guidelines may help you to create a space that allows for honest personal exploration through sharing:

- Create a sense of shared purpose that can foster the kind of internal reflection that happens through group conversation.
- Remind participants of simple ground rules for conversations. For example: Avoid commenting on and critiquing each other's comments. Make room for everyone to speak. Step into or away from the conversation appropriately. No one participant should dominate the conversation. Let silence sit, allowing participants to gather their thoughts.
- For each of the questions below, we recommend that you print out the article in question, or provide the link to it, and we ask that you take a moment to read it in print or on screen, before the conversation begins.
- Allow people a few minutes to absorb the article, perhaps even to read it a second time, before moving into the discussion.

Consider & Converse

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Interpretive Questions

can focus the reader on the ideas in the articles.

- Rabbi **Hannah Dresner** [page 1] introduces readers to the concept of legacy. Rather than focus on what we inherit from our parents and grandparents, and pass on to our children, Hannah chooses to write about the way Torah — and Judaism — passes from one generation to the next. She writes, “God is aroused and enlivened by our expression of [Torah], not when we feed God’s words right back in blind obedience or when we dutifully repeat the words of our ancestors, but when we express our involvement in relationship with God by speaking our own versions of Torah: Torah that we understand, live, and transmit.” She goes on to wonder if her grandparents, who were Orthodox, would recognize her Torah. “What would they think of the painted eggs on my Seder table? Or my embrace of non-Jews coming forward for group *aliyot* in the spiritual community I lead? What would they think of my feminine rabbinate, altogether? So much appears different, but the thread that connects it all is that my children seek their Jewish authenticity with the same seriousness as their ancestors.” How does your practice of Judaism bear resemblance to your parents and grandparents, and where does it diverge? What are the threads that you can follow back into previous generations? We hear so much today about “authenticity”: What is the connection between living authentic Jewish lives and inheriting a religious belief system of norms and practices?
- **Mona Fishbane** [page 3] writes about family relationships, neuroscience, and inherited trauma. She explores how intergenerational cycles of hurt and disappointment are perpetuated, and how we can “grow up” our relationships to move beyond those painful cycles. She writes that “while we are molded by genetics and early family experience, we are capable of growing beyond old constraints — thanks to neuroplasticity (the ability of the brain to change), which extends throughout life. We can make conscious choices to break the chain of hurt and trauma. By repositioning ourselves vis-à-vis our past, we can author our present and shape the future.” This essential work is not only important for ourselves, that we live healthier and more fulfilling emotional lives, but also that we “stand between the generation before us and the generation that follows; how we stand determines what we will transmit to our children.” If trauma is handed down from generation to generation, how does that affect the nature vs nurture debate? Are social ills, such as racism or bigotry, passed from generation to generation? How does that change the national conversation about racism? How do the effects of Jewish historical traumas — the Holocaust and others — play out in subsequent generations?

Reflective Questions

can help one to integrate the ideas in these articles with one’s own sense of self.

- Magid **Jhos Singer** [page 3] writes about “*dor l’dor* as a spiritual practice ...about manifesting trust, love, and hope for generations we will never meet.” Jhos tries to upend the Jewish community’s obsession with “continuity,” writing that “*dor l’dor* is merely a delivery system, not a duplication service. And no matter how you arrive in the community, Judaism sees you as a child of Abraham and Sarah, *dor l’dor* isn’t necessarily linear. All of us are given genetic traits that are influenced by our environment; each of us becomes a link in the chain between wisdom and biology.” What does the notion of *dor l’dor* — from generation to generation — imply for Jews by choice? For Jews who have been adopted? For Jews who are estranged from their families? For Jews who have opted to diverge from living the life that their parents had set out for them? Where and with whom do you enter this conversation about legacy and the push back against “destiny”?

Consider & Converse

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- Rabbi **Elana Zaiman** [page 4] writes about how to share our stories and values with our children through letters. She shares her own experience of receiving a letter from her father — at age fourteen — who wrote “from his heart, putting himself on the page in a more vulnerable way than he had ever spoken to us in person.” Some letters, or “ethical wills,” can be weighty and imposing — especially if the child receives the letter after the death of a parent. Elana asks us to consider how to “share our wisdom, experience, and love so that we do not make our loved ones uncomfortable.” What would you like to share with your children or grandchildren? What heart wisdom would you want to share with dear friends? Should these letters we write to share ourselves and our wisdom with the people we love be shared while we are still alive, or should they wait and be shared upon death? What might complicate your decision to share your stories and wisdom now?
- In *NiSh'ma* [page 2], our simulated Talmud page, three commentators explicate a line from the Mishnah about creation: “Furthermore, [Adam was created alone] for the sake of peace among people, that one might not say to another, ‘my father was greater than yours.’” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5) Rabbi **Lev Meirowitz Nelson** writes that this text “reminds us that our generations stretch all the way back to the first human, Adam. And it teaches us that my ancestor was no better than your ancestor. A basic commonality underlies all humanity and demands equal rights in a way that is fundamentally at odds with racism, classism, and xenophobia.” **Leah Vincent** left her ultra-Orthodox family to find new guides to explore her life. She writes about developing a personal mythology and imaginative narrative that is “strong enough to shape a life.” **Koach Baruch Frazier** agrees with Lev that we are “descendants of one common ancestor, Adam — the first human. And... our common ancestral rootedness demands equality.” If we are descended from the same “Adam,” as the Mishnah asserts, what are the implications for our intersecting lives with other Americans? What is its impact on the notion of Jewish peoplehood? What are some other teachings — such as the sensibility that we are all created in the image of God, *b'tzelem Elohim* — that play into and also complicate the notion of shared ancestry?