

Threadbare and Laden with Meaning

Vayechi - Rav Hanan Schlesinger

It could be rather embarrassing. It's threadbare. A number of times it has been repaired, but at this point the cloth is just too old and worn to be mended. The little tears are getting bigger every month, but still I continue to lovingly drape it over my body. I prayed in this talit for 26 years - the first real talit I ever owned. My mother-in-law gave it to me when I married her daughter. Under the hupah it was there with us, upon me. It means a lot to me.

I am not going to give it up, not going to part with it ... not until next week when my son gets married. He will wear it under the hupah. It symbolizes the tradition and the continuity that I pass on to him. There is no elegant menora that belonged to my grandmother's mother. There is no kiddush cup that has been passed down in the family through the generations. Perhaps there never were such family heirlooms. Could be they were too poor. Or it might be that there were such things, but they were disposed of as valueless when my grandparents jettisoned the customs and commitments of our ancestors in their efforts to join the American melting pot.

So for whatever reason, from my side of the family I have no ritual objects to give my eldest son as he begins building a life for himself with his young wife. From my wife's side there is nothing either ... except for this tattered talit. It is a memory of my mother-in-law. She's gone. Thank God, she lived to see the marriage of over ten grandchildren but at my son's wedding she will not be present. But the talit will. May it only last one more week...

This old talit represents the renewal of tradition. I did not receive one from my parents. Well actually I did. At my bar mitzvah, but it was not the type of talit that was meant to be worn. At least not more than once a year. It was the type that one keeps in a closet until Rosh haShana rolls around again ... or forever. It was no fault of their own that my parents did not pass on to me a living talit. My father didn't own one. Neither did his father. My great-grandfather



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probably did. My great great-grandfather certainly did. But since then the tradition has been broken...

For most of my family it seems to have been broken irreparably, permanently. Some relatives are no longer Jewish. Most are, but many of their spouses are not. Their kids will not be getting much in the way of a Jewish education. They may not end up identifying as Jews at all. And even my cousins who married within the fold, their children hardly know they are Jewish. It's just about the end of the line in our family for a three thousand year old heritage...

Except for me. Thirty years ago I returned to her, and she to me. There has been something almost desperate about our bonding. I knew that in my family I was basically all that was left. I was salvaging a dying ember from a flame that was just about to go out. So I had to make it glow. It did.

My son received from me the Torah that I didn't receive from my father. He received a tradition. In one small corner of the extended family the teachings of our people are alive and well. Thank God for that. The days of the threadbare talit may be numbered, but the days of the tradition it represents are not. Am Yisrael Chai.



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