

Shabbat Parashat Vayeitzei Roots & Wings

Over the course of the past week, our Grade 7 students have begun their work on their “Roots & Wings” family history projects as part of our Tikkun Olam curriculum. Each year, when our graduating students arrive to school with their completed projects and put them out for display, the members of our school community are blown away by the quality of the work and the effort that has gone into them. They really are a sight to see and this year, with fifty-eight Grade 7 students, we expect our most fulsome display yet! However, what we teach our students as they are working toward the completion of the project is “not to lose the forest for trees.” When engaging in a project that takes several weeks to complete and time to design and assemble in unique and creative ways, it is easy to lose focus on WHY they are engaging in the enterprise in the first place. What are the lessons they are intended to learn? That family history and stories contribute significantly to your sense of personal identity and that each of our family histories are part of the collective memory of the Jewish people. While we celebrate and work at developing and understanding our own identities, we are all part of something much greater: The Jewish People. Once we grasp these two concepts (our roots), our senses of self, our confidence, and our characters will be stronger, giving us even greater opportunities to fly (our wings) in the future.

Understanding who we are and from where we come are essential aspects of our Jewish tradition, going back as far as the beginning of the Torah. As early as the Creation story, the origins of human beings and genealogies of the first families are included in the Torah’s narrative in order to emphasize these concepts for all future generations. In the same way as our families today pass on traditions, customs, family expressions, and stories, the Torah similarly transmits the human and then Israelite stories in order to share traditions and values with us. In this week’s *parasha*, the roots of our Jewish people are born as Yaakov (as polygamy was a custom in the biblical time period) partners with four women to father thirteen children: twelve sons and one daughter. The progenitors of each of the twelve tribes are born, the foundation for a nation of Israelites (though Yaakov’s name has not quite yet been changed to Yisra’el) established. We do, indeed, all come from one family, a principle which must influence how it is that we think about ourselves as Jewish people and influence our sense of commitment to our brothers and sisters and cousins around the world.

Family is difficult. We know this to be true from our own lives and experiences, and we read about it in the Torah stories of the first Jewish families. However, no matter how much of a challenge navigating family life can be, our tradition is telling us just how important it is that we get acquainted with our roots so that we can more deeply understand who we really are. The Grade 7 Roots & Wings project is based in this lesson from Torah. However, my hope is that without the help of a school project, we all take the time to become acquainted with our family trees and family

histories, allowing the tales from both our ancient ancestors from Torah and our more immediate relatives to contribute to our understandings of who we are.

Around your Shabbat table this week, take a moment to share an important story from your family's history in order to enhance the experience of your meal and keep in mind the impact one's roots can have on the growth and power of one's wings.

Shabbat Shalom!