

Kiruv

The ba'al teshuvah movement has been one of the most exciting and important phenomena to affect the Jewish people in centuries. Thousands of young men and women all over the world have changed the way they live, at great personal sacrifice. They have rejoined the Jewish people in using the Torah as their guide. With them came talent, knowledge and a passion for religion that the Jewish people desperately needed. Yet a mass return to tradition cannot happen without bumps along the way. I have spent over twenty years in the world of outreach, guiding the unobservant into the fold in Jerusalem, Israel; Buffalo, New York; New York City, and Melbourne, Australia.

Some years ago, I moved to Monsey, New York. At the time, I served as the national director of Jewish education at the Orthodox Union and the spiritual leader of Congregation Bais Torah. In both of these capacities, I re-met hundreds of ba'alei teshuvah, in Monsey and across the continent, who had, at one point during their spiritual journeys, sat at my

Shabbat table. What nachas and joy to see how beautifully they had grown!

Yet as I listened to them, I realized that many ba'alei teshuvah who had successfully integrated into the Orthodox community were experiencing difficult challenges, particularly with their children. As I discussed this problem with rabbinic leaders throughout the country, I learned that they were encountering ba'alei teshuvah in similar situations.

There seems to be a high rate of rebellion and a common thread of behavioral and educational problems among the children of some ba'alei teshuvah. I am not a sociologist, nor do I have any statistics, but when I presented my anecdotal findings at a convention of outreach professionals, I noted many in the audience nodding in agreement. Subsequently, I received dozens of phone calls regarding the issue.

This article was written to identify some of the challenges that are specific to the children of ba'alei teshuvah and to offer some perspective.

The Generation After: Bridging the Teshuvah Gap

By Yaacov Haber

The sixties and seventies were fascinating times; there was a surge of interest in the spiritual, the transcendent. Thousands of young people, disil-

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lusioned by the materialism of society, were searching for a different way of life. They were disenchanted with the academic, political and even the religious leadership of the time. They went from the miracles of the Six Day War to the assassination of heroes and the exposé of Watergate. They were searching for utopia; they wanted to raise their families in a different kind of world.

Yiddishkeit promised them just that. Communities and rabbis reached out to beginners, and *yeshivot* were created for them. Newcomers encountered a deep and meaningful tradition. They

found religious families full of warmth and homes that were open for Shabbat. Thousands signed up—the *ba'al teshuvah* movement was born.

Our grandparents never could have imagined this. Yet the *ba'al teshuvah* movement quickly became a major factor in the growth of Orthodox Judaism. *Ba'alei teshuvah* contributed not only numbers but also talent, culture, music and literature. Astounded journalists and sociologists wrote tens of books and articles describing this phenomenon.

The Orthodox community continued to respond to the flood of enthusiastic newcomers. Many synagogues

created beginners' minyanim and offered adult-education courses. ArtScroll was born and introduced *Chumashim* and *siddurim* with modern English translations.

Fast forward thirty or forty years. Many of the *ba'alei teshuvah* of the sixties married and moved into communities where they felt comfortable and accepted. They sent their children to the local yeshivah or day school and tried hard to fit into the mainstream. The second generation in the *ba'al teshuvah* family was born.

One would have thought that children of *ba'alei teshuvah* would automatically be enrolled into the "FFB (*frum* from birth) club." Yet, as time went on, it became clear that these children have to deal with issues that are rarely present in homes where the parents, grandparents and all of the extended family have always been religious.

To be sure, the majority of the children of *ba'alei teshuvah* develop beautifully, fulfilling the dreams of their parents and their communities. But for some, the challenge of being a member of the "second generation" can lead to grave problems; some even end up rejecting the very lifestyle their parents struggled so hard to attain, often with a disdainful retort such as, "You rejected your upbringing, now it's my turn."

Here are a few of the challenges that are unique to members of the second generation.

What happens when a parent begins to depend on his children for halachic guidance?

The Mesorah Dilemma

So much of *Yiddishkeit* is learned in the home, much more than we realize. Usually children receive direction in setting up their own religious homes by observing their parents. But the second-generation *ba'al teshuvah* does not always have the benefit of this direction.

Without a father or grandfather who is able to transmit the family customs and traditions, the *ba'al teshuvah's* child does not have the solid *mesorah* that so many FFBs take for granted. *Nusach hatefillah* and whether to wear a *kittel* at the Pesach Seder or eat in the Sukkah the night of Shemini Atzeret all become matters of confusion.

At the beginning of their spiritual journeys, many *ba'alei teshuvah* tend to merge varied *minhagim* (customs)—the best of all worlds—into the family lifestyle. They pick and choose traditions they like or feel are meaningful. But *minhagim* often serve the purpose of identifying one with a particular subgroup within Orthodoxy. These subgroups serve as support systems. By picking and choosing customs, however, one can become "a man without a country," creating a difficult environment for children.

"What did your father do during Kiddush?" the son asks his father.

"Well, he would usually lie on the couch while watching television," the father replies.

"What is our *minhag*?"

"Well, my dad definitely did not wear *tefillin* on Chol Hamoed, and I'm pretty sure that he didn't say Hallel on Yom Ha'atzmaut."

After visiting friends' homes and deepening his own knowledge of Judaism, the child of the *ba'al teshuvah* realizes that his family's traditions are a virtual mishmash. He may try to educate his parents regarding the inconsistency of their practices. Or he may become confused or even embarrassed.

Lev Banim al Avotam / Psychological Role Reversal

All of us dream that our children will grow up to be better than we are. But what happens when a parent begins to depend on his children for halachic guidance? What happens when a father has to check with his young son about the proper passage to say in shul or the appropriateness of his garb or speech? What happens when a child asks his mother a simple homework question and she doesn't know the answer? These situations can lead to a reversal of the dependency role, in which parents turn to their children for nurturing and protection. They can also result in the weakening of the parental authority, which may ultimately lead to serious discipline problems.

Who Raises the Child?

Many *ba'alei teshuvah* are initially attracted to Judaism because of the admiration, if not the reverence, they feel for Orthodoxy's educational system. The journey to holiness often begins when the *ba'al teshuvah* is a guest at a Shabbat table and sees lovely, well-behaved children reciting Torah lessons for the assembled to enjoy. He suddenly becomes aware that there is a better way to raise children. There is a system that works, and he wants the same for his own children.

When his own children arrive, however, the situation is not as easy as it looked. He sends his children to local *yeshivot* where they are forced to subscribe to a particular educational system. In order to fit in, the children have to dress the same, talk the same, play the same and even dream the same as their classmates. The parent, who is not necessarily familiar with the nuances, may fail to distinguish

between *halachah* and fad, substance and style. Nor does he necessarily have the self-assuredness to tell his children, "We don't do that," when the neighbor or classmate does it. He may be overly concerned that his children will stand out and thereby compromise their social and religious development.

Often, this results in parents searching for a guide. Invariably, the well-meaning *rebbe* or school principal steps in and becomes the expert on mainstreaming, parenting and *Yiddishkeit* in general. Soon the third grade *rebbe* becomes the family rabbi.

People used to think that rabbis and teachers who were unqualified to serve the "sophisticated" needs of the yeshivah-educated were more than capable of servicing the seemingly "elementary" needs of *ba'alei teshuvah*. However, today it is evident to *kiruv* professionals that those in the field of outreach need to be able to provide guidance on complex psychological, intellectual and halachic issues.

Unfortunately, this realization has not stopped the unequipped teacher or *rebbe* from stepping up to the plate.

I recall being graced with a visit from one of the most venerable *roshei yeshivot* in the United States during a *kiruv* retreat I organized in Melbourne. I naturally asked him if he would honor us with a *shiur*. His response was unforgettable: "I can give a *shiur* in any yeshivah in the world on a moment's notice, but for your crowd I really have to spend time preparing."

I have been involved in too many cases where the most inappropriate advice—advice that has created irreparable damage in families—has been offered by inexperienced, uneducated do-gooders. Oftentimes, the lack of background prevents *ba'alei teshuvah* from using their better judgment. They therefore accept the most awful advice, thinking that it is the Torah way.

I recall a sincere, educated *ba'al teshuvah* couple that was committed to raising their children without corporal punishment. However, the principal of their son's elite school told these gentle souls that hitting children is part of


the Orthodox way. (It is not!) Their child suffered unspeakable humiliation and physical abuse by his teacher, his principal and even by his parents. Finally, after much encouragement, the parents challenged the principal. Unfortunately, by then it was too late; the child was lost to his family and to the Jewish people.

The Solution

The Midrash teaches that before Avraham embarked on his career of servicing mankind and spreading a deep understanding of God, he consulted with the *kohen*, Malkitzedek, king of Jerusalem. The Midrash reports that Malkitzedek greeted Avraham with bread and wine and taught him the secret of these items. Wine is useless when it is fresh. The older it is, the better it tastes. Bread tastes best straight out of the oven: the fresher the better. After a short time, it becomes inedible. So too, said Malkitzedek, when you teach the world about God, give people old wine—time-tested traditions and teachings. But be sure to also give them some fresh bread, teachings for today and for tomorrow.

We need to train our young leaders in bread and wine. As one embarks on a career of teaching Torah and serving the Jewish community, he must be trained in the beautiful and timeless message of the Torah while learning to constantly apply and reapply the Torah to the current issues of the day.

It is increasingly obvious that rabbis and others who go into community service need to be better trained to deal with the thousands of *ba'alei teshuvah* our communities are blessed with. So often when a young rabbi begins his career, there is a striking dichotomy between what he has learned and what he is called upon to deal with. Many *semichah* programs sponsor field trips to butcher shops, community *eruvim*, *shofar* factories and matzah bakeries. Some offer lectures by outstanding psychologists and family counselors.



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However, the success of the *ba'al teshuvah* movement necessitates that *kiruv* training courses be offered to rabbis as well. Veteran *kiruv* professionals and community rabbis should get together to create an appropriate curriculum to be covered in these courses.

In Jerusalem, hundreds of *kollel* men attend weekly lectures and training seminars on the *halachot* and techniques of *kiruv*. These opportunities hardly existed twenty-five years ago when I received *semichah*. However, this is only the beginning. Such training courses must be further developed and expanded into other communities around the Jewish world.

While having qualified and capable religious mentors will certainly help, it won't eliminate all of the challenges facing the second-generation *ba'al teshuvah*. I don't have any other solution, but as Reb Chaim Soloveichik of Brisk often remarked to his students, "*Farshtein a kasha is shoim a halbe teretz*" ("Understanding a question is half the answer"). By highlighting the special challenges facing the *ba'al teshuvah* family today, I hope to deepen our understanding of these issues so that we can work together to find creative solutions. JA

Preventing Second-Generation

Dropouts

The secret is out. Not all children of Orthodox parents remain observant. The dropout problem extends from high schools to college campuses, with new organizations constantly cropping up to help at-risk teens.

Many explanations have been given for this phenomenon. Whether it is the

It is therefore quite surprising to discover that many who work with Orthodox dropouts report that children of *ba'alei teshuvah* are significantly over-represented in their programs.

Years ago there was a joke circulating that when a *ba'al teshuvah* stopped being bothered by someone talking in shul, you knew he was a full-fledged member of the Orthodox community.

especially those who become religious as adults, the realization that their previous outlook on life was mistaken can lead to their having a lack of confidence in their own judgment. During my thirty years of experience with adult *ba'alei teshuvah*, I have frequently seen a difference between someone who becomes observant as a teenager, for example through the

By Shaya Karlinsky

lure of a materialistic society, the failure of Orthodoxy to sufficiently engage the hearts and minds of some of our youth or the result of a Judaism that has often become *mitzvat anashim melumadah*, practiced out of habit, one sub-set of the Orthodox community should have been insulated from this problem: children of *ba'alei teshuvah*.

The *teshuvah* movement broke new ground over thirty years ago, bringing thousands of estranged Jews back to authentic Judaism. These young men and women made a conscious choice to reject a secular lifestyle and embrace the Torah, overcoming tremendous obstacles along the way. Many have a deep understanding of, and an enthusiasm for, Judaism that can make even some in the mainstream Orthodox community feel a little insecure about their own attachment to Judaism.

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Sadly, the new joke about graduating to mainstream Orthodoxy may be having a child who has “dropped out.”

Judaism has always viewed “building the next generation” as a top priority; thus, one of the measures of the success of the *kiruv* movement, as with any innovation in Judaism, is its ability to transmit Judaism to the next generation. Parents who found their way back to Torah, against all odds and sociological predictions, should have a natural advantage in raising children who follow in their footsteps. Examining why this isn't always so may help clarify how the *kiruv* movement needs to adjust its curriculum, and in what areas the Orthodox community—if it is serious in its outreach efforts—needs to adjust its priorities and deployment of resources.

Aquiring a Torah Perspective

At a convention of the Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals (AJOP) many years ago, Rabbi Nachman Bulman, *z”l*, warned of the disorientation that can occur in the thinking process of *ba'alei teshuvah*. For some *ba'alei teshuvah*,

OU's National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY), and someone who becomes observant as an adult. There is a clear advantage in having a Torah outlook evolve slowly, during one's formative years. Acquiring a Torah worldview requires formal Torah study and the observation of role models (since many *ba'alei teshuvah* do not grow up with role models for Torah marriages and Torah parenting). Both of these take time.

Unfortunately, we live a society that promotes the idea that we should have what we want “now.” Dr. Abraham J. Twerski calls this “an addict's concept of time”; the desire for instant results, regardless of the long-term cost. The *kiruv* movement is not insulated from this mentality, and many of those doing outreach work, as well as those funding it, judge the success of a program by how *fast* and by how *many* Jews are being convinced to adopt a Torah lifestyle.¹ Educating a Jew who wasn't raised in a Torah home is a long-range task, and the failure to view it as such increases the risk that children of *ba'alei teshuvah* will themselves need *kiruv* programs.

Moreover, when one develops a Torah outlook slowly, it becomes more

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integrated into his personality; short-circuiting this process can hamper one's ability to confidently transmit Judaism to one's children. Indeed, the disorientation Rav Bulman spoke about can be the source of many of the problems that afflict children of *ba'alei teshuvah*.

Thus, for example, those who are FFB (*frum* from birth) tend to learn from their own experiences growing up how to respond (or not respond) to a child who breaches *halachah*. Hopefully, as parents, they model their behavior accordingly. But someone who was introduced to *halachah* as an adult may lack the perspective necessary to make certain decisions. Should a child who sleeps through minyan be treated as one who broke curfew, one who played with matches or one who went outside without a coat in the rain? And what about a child who wears clothes that don't conform to community standards? Overreactions that may result from a lack of perspective can have devastating effects on a child.

Aseh Lecha Rav: Avoiding Bad Advice from Good People

The Orthodox system is built on the notion of *aseh lecha rav*,² having access to spiritual leaders and guides. The system provides mentors through shuls, schools and *yeshivot*. However, those who don't grow up in

the system may lack this critical resource. But a *ba'al teshuvah* tends to need even more direction, guidance and education than an FFB, and he needs it from people who have a special sensitivity to his background and needs. It is ironic and shortsighted that significant funding is frequently available for programs that inspire and convince the estranged Jew to adopt mitzvah observance, while limited sums are devoted to the longer, more difficult yet critical process of supporting the *ba'al teshuvah* once he has made the commitment. The large investments made in influencing people to become mitzvah observant would pay much greater dividends if more time and money were spent nurturing and supporting the long-term growth of *ba'alei teshuvah*.

Ba'alei teshuvah who do not find appropriate guides are vulnerable to accepting bad advice from well-meaning people. It should be obvious that something appropriate for an FFB born in Lakewood or in Jerusalem might be totally inappropriate for a *ba'al teshuvah* living in St. Louis, or for one with an Ivy League degree or concert-level music skills.

Often, well-meaning people give *ba'alei teshuvah* the message that it might be advantageous for them to disown their secular education and life experience; however, throwing away one's identity means cutting away parts of one's personality and creativity. Maintaining a connection to one's previous experiences can make one's Judaism and relationship with God much richer, while helping to avoid the extremism to which some *ba'alei*

teshuvah are drawn.

Yet, it is a real challenge for a *ba'al teshuvah* to retain the important parts of his past while trying to integrate into a polarized Orthodox world. As a result, he may send his children mixed messages. This struggle is especially difficult nowadays since contemporary secular culture is much less "Jewish-friendly" than it used to be (note, for example, the blatant materialism and sexuality of Western culture; the breakdown of family structure and values in society and the debasing of the very ideas of objective truth and morality in the academic world.) But many *ba'alei teshuvah* need to walk this tightrope, and there need to be people—both rabbis and laymen—who can help them do so. These mentors must be nurtured in order to become an integral part of the *kiruv* movement. Unlike the *Chareidi* world, which places outreach high on its agenda, the Modern Orthodox world has not chosen to do so, until recently. This has made it difficult for some *ba'alei teshuvah*—who are more suited to a Modern Orthodox lifestyle—to grow in a way that may be most appropriate for them and for their children.

Over ten years ago, a *ba'al teshuvah* couple came to study at Darche Noam Institutions, an outreach institution in Jerusalem where I teach. They had saved money to finance a year of learning in Israel. Their plan was to return to the States after the year was up, and the husband would continue his graduate studies. Their parents weren't excited about the plan, but they didn't apply undue pressure since the couple was financing it themselves. Moreover, since the couple was planning to come back after a year, the opposition was mitigated.

After Pesach, as they were reviewing their finances, the couple found that they could afford to stay another year. They had both gained so much spiritually, and they realized what an additional year of learning would accomplish for them.

At this point, there was strong parental resistance. And the pressure point was simple: If you come back at the end of the year, we will fund your

graduate studies. If you stay, you will be on your own when you return.

I had helped students decide when they should resist parental pressure against additional Torah learning. But I sensed that this question was an especially delicate one, with long-term ramifications. So I took the couple to see Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, z"l.

Rav Auerbach listened to the dilemma and directed them as only a *gadol* can:

If it appeared likely that the parents would really cut off the funding for higher education, this would limit the man's career prospects in his chosen profession. If we were confident that the couple would be able to live in a religious community, and that the husband would have a fixed time for learning and a close connection with the local rabbis, then they should return to the States at the end of the year. Otherwise, Rav Auerbach explained to me later, this young man's future career prospects and income could be compromised. This would likely lead to frustration, and some level of blame might be placed on the extra time he spent in yeshivah. It was not worth the risk of destabilizing the couple's Judaism if we were confident that the community to which they were returning would provide a religiously supportive environment. Of course, if we felt that the parents wouldn't really follow through on their threat, there would be a tremendous advantage for the couple to devote a second year to Torah learning. That, in fact, was the happy outcome of this story.

(Had the question come from an FFB couple, who were surrounded by people sacrificing careers for full-time learning, no doubt the advice would have been different.)

I believe this story illustrates that when advising *ba'alei teshuvah*, one needs the capacity to engage in long-term thinking, to make a realistic assessment of the real needs of people and to feel concern about the particular individual, rather than trying to mold him in one's own image.

Marketing Judaism

The goals in today's secular culture are to attain more pleasure, more comfort and more success, all as quickly as possible. Orthodox Jews are not insulated from these forces, and working to refine our personalities requires great vigilance and serious work. But there are *kiruv* systems that have tapped into these secular motivations, and have designed *kiruv* techniques to market Judaism and mitzvah observance as a way to obtain many of the goals of modern society, whether it be pleasure, emotional fulfillment or greater material success. *Kiruv* organizations frequently recruit new *ba'alei teshuvah* in one of two ways. The "intellectual approach" involves presenting philosophical arguments and logical proofs of the existence of God and the truth of the Torah. The "marketing approach" involves promoting Torah Judaism as a way of solving many of one's personal problems and frustrations. I believe that while the marketing approach to *kiruv* helps create a greater number of *ba'alei teshuvah* in the shortest amount of time, it often shortchanges them in the process. Presenting Shabbat as a time of rejuvenation that will make one more effective in one's career, *middot* development as a way to win friends or family purity as a way to enhance one's marital bliss can lead to more *ba'alei teshuvah* in the short run. But it must be supplemented

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with serious Torah study and proper guidance about man's real purpose in the world. Cheering on the outward manifestations of Orthodoxy without assuring inner change can be destructive. We cannot ignore the Torah perspective of the Jew as a servant of God.

This approach to *kiruv* also sets up unrealistic expectations on the part of the *ba'al teshuvah*, since mitzvah observance, in and of itself, will not provide him with what he was seeking. A Torah lifestyle frequently requires sacrifices in things that society, and the prospective *ba'al teshuvah*, holds in high esteem. The idea that one can "have it all" or that "Judaism will make you the happiest person" is appealing in the short run. But Judaism—and life—is more complicated than that, and the disillusionment created by failed expectations has led to many failed *ba'alei teshuvah* and to children of *ba'alei teshuvah* who leave the fold. Torah Judaism is a system built on delayed gratification, and on service—of God, our community, the Jewish nation and ultimately the world. We aren't here just for ourselves, but for a purpose that extends beyond ourselves. Man is endowed with a spirit that must be nurtured through character development, altruism, self-control, moral choices and all the other qualities that make us uniquely human.

We spend a great amount of time and resources teaching our non-religious brethren about Shabbat, *kashrut*, family purity, holiday rituals and even full-time

kollel learning. But “*im ein derech erez, ein Torah*,”³ without proper character traits, there can be no proper practice of Torah. Our outreach efforts must focus on helping to shape personalities that are capable of receiving Torah as it was given at Sinai, and which can then be transmitted to coming generations.

The Jewish people left Egypt with a convincing display of God’s omnipotence. Intellectually and experientially, the Jews knew there was a God and that it was in their best interest to follow His commandments. Yet there was a forty-nine day period from the Exodus until the giving of the Torah: the period of *Sefirat Ha’omer*. What was happening during those seven weeks? Why couldn’t the Jewish people receive the Torah immediately?

Reb Chaim Vital, the disciple of the Arizal, provides us with a striking answer in his work *Sha’arei Kedushah*.

One must be more vigilant about bad character traits than about the observance of both positive and negative commandments. For when one possesses good character traits, it will be easy to fulfill all the commandments.

The seven weeks of *Sefirat Ha’omer* are a time of character development. The Jews had to grow into human beings who were capable of receiving the Torah, developing the traits that distinguish a spiritual human being from an intellectually endowed animal.

Rambam (*Hilchot Teshuvah*, chap. 7) writes:

Just as a person must repent [from sins that involve actions, such as sexual impropriety, thievery and robbery] so, too, must a person examine his corrupted character traits and repent from anger, hatred, jealousy, levity, greed, pursuit of public honor, gluttony These sins [of character] are actually more serious than sins with actions, for when a person becomes habituated [in these traits] it is harder to disengage from them.

The fact that Jews raised with no knowledge of Torah are freely choosing to resist familial and societal pressures to adopt a Torah way of life is one of the most inspiring and exciting occurrences in the Jewish world. It also serves as tangible validation of the eternity of our Torah. But for that success to continue and be transmitted to the next generation, we need to develop a long-term perspective on our *kiruv* activities. We need to ensure that the Judaism we are teaching is authentic, not just appealing, and that the Jews we are bringing back to Torah become knowledgeable. We need to ensure that proper character development is taking place along with the lifestyle changes we encourage. We need to provide role models that are appropriate for the *ba’al teshuvah’s* background. Here, the Modern Orthodox community should be playing a much more active and visible

role than it has until now. Modern Orthodox role models could open the door to many estranged Jews by showing authentic Torah life in a way that may be more appropriate and realistic for people raised in a secular culture.

Finally, resources need to be devoted to what may be termed continuing education. After the *kiruv* programs have convinced the non-Orthodox to become mitzvah observant and taught them the ritual details, the work is not over. It is just beginning. **JA**

Notes

1. The phenomenon of “failed *ba’alei teshuvah*” or *ba’alei teshuvah* who drop out after several months of commitment led many in the community to search for ways to prevent this. One method was to encourage marriage earlier in the *kiruv* process than may have been wise. The thinking was that marriage, with a home and family, would solidify the *teshuvah* process. Unfortunately, these rushed marriages sometimes led to unstable homes and even divorce. In certain cases, marriages were held together when they shouldn’t have been, and the children became vulnerable to rejecting the Judaism of their parents.

2. *Avot*, chap. 1, *mishnah* 6.

3. *Avot*, chap. 3, *mishnah* 21. See also Midrash Rabbah, Vayikra 9:3, “*Derech erez* preceded the Torah in the world by twenty-six generations....”