

A photograph on a shelf behind my desk here at BHBE gets a lot of attention when people visit my office. It is a black-and-white picture of a man wearing a black hat, a long, greying beard, and a long black robe over a shirt and tie. This picture dates back to the late 19th century in Galicia. The man depicted in this picture is my great-great-grandfather, Rabbi Wolf Walcher. Rabbi Walcher was the chief rabbi of a small town in Galicia until he immigrated to the United States with his wife and four children in 1899 alongside over 200,000 Galician Jews who immigrated to the US between 1891 and 1910.¹

Next to his photo on the shelf is another black and white photograph. This one depicts a young, stylish, modern couple whose love permeates their picture. The woman in this photograph is Wolf's daughter, Cecelia - my great-grandmother and my namesake. She was incredible. Under her leadership, as a young adult, the Ladies Kisheneff Society of Philadelphia raised over \$235,000 in 1951 to contribute to the State of Israel through Keren Kayemet. Cecelia often traveled to Israel but frequently stayed with her good friend, Prime Minister Golda Meir. Cecelia's efforts were so significant that an entire area in the north of Israel was named in her honor. The certificate of this incredible honor sits next to her photograph behind my desk.

Despite being father and daughter, Wolf and Cecilia lived very different lives as adults. Wolf held tightly onto the world he left behind. Cecelia embraced modernity and their new home. I always wondered if Wolf knew what his daughter's exceptional future could be when he landed in the new world.

I think we should each ask ourselves the following question: Have we known, and do we know, the tremendous impact each one of us is capable of making? And what is the role of our past in determining the impact we can make?

I ask this question this morning because, in our Torah reading, Moses instructs the Israelites to look forward far into the future and simultaneously directly to the past.

Moses instructs the Israelites to bring dedications to the center of religious life in Jerusalem for the future, so far into the future that the generation Moses instructs will not be present for the Temple's construction. In fact, there will be 480 years between the Israelites' wandering through the wilderness and the building of the Temple.

Moses looked far into the future and guided the people on how to connect to the Temple in Jerusalem by bringing gifts of gratitude called *bikkurim*. *Bikkurim* were similar to a beautiful ornate fruit basket filled with all of the first fruits of the year that would be brought as a sacred present to the Temple and its leadership. With this futuristic guidance, we might expect that the people would continue to look forward as they gifted the baskets.

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https://publishup.uni-potsdam.de/opus4-ubp/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/53285/file/pardes27_S69-83.pdf

For example, when the Israelites arrived in Jerusalem to deliver this dedication, we might expect them to voice aspirations for the upcoming planting season and the year ahead. But that is not so. Instead, Moses instructs the people to deliver the *bikkurim* and recite this formula:

My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt few in number and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The LORD freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O LORD, have given me.²

This language does not describe gratitude for the harvest or the safe arrival in Jerusalem. Rather, the pilgrim reflects on the Jewish people's story. There is wisdom in this approach to visiting the Temple during the holidays. Namely, to truly affirm one's identity, we must look toward the past. It is in this exercise that we develop a sense of self.

Marshall Duke, Ph.D., of Emory University, calls this the "multigenerational self:"

Our research shows that children who know a lot about their family tend to be more resilient: higher levels of self-esteem, more self-control, better family functioning, lower levels of anxiety, fewer behavioral problems, and better chances for good outcomes when faced with challenges.

Why is that? Part of it is that family stories help children frame the question: "Do I come from the kind of family who would do X,Y or Z?" The X, Y or Z can be good, like helping someone in need, or bad like using drugs. This context goes with the child even when the family is not there. So this is very powerful. Through family stories, children develop a sense of what we call the "multigenerational self," and the personal strength and moral guidance that comes with that. When something challenging happens, they can call on that expanded sense of self to pull through.³

This practice is especially Jewish. When we approach the year ahead, beginning on Rosh Hashanah, we often look to the year we leave behind and ask questions like: What can I do differently? What do I want to carry with me into the new year? What am I grateful for?

These questions extend to many areas of our lives, and we build a multigenerational self through questioning and exploring.

² Deuteronomy 26:5-10

³ <https://lnw advisors.com/wp-content/uploads/Questions-and-Answers-with-Dr.-Marshall-Duke.pdf>

I often think about my great-great-grandfather Rabbi Wolf Walcher and what he would think about his great-great-grandson becoming an American rabbi. That's when I realized that his dedication, Jewish pride, and commitment to our tradition and people led me to where I am today. As we approach this new year, may we find ourselves in the history of...well...us. And look back with a sense of gratitude as we look forward with hope.