

Rabbi Rick Kellner

Erev Rosh Hashanah

“The Torah scroll contains the secrets of our people’s life from Sinai until now. It’s teaching is love and justice, goodness and hope. Freedom is its gift to all who treasure it. We pass this Torah through the generations of your family, to you, to guard it, cherish it and live by its guidelines.” Each Shabbat I share these words with our Bar or Bat Mitzvah. We enact the sacred modern ritual of passing the Torah through the generations of a child’s family as we symbolically demonstrate the foundation of this child’s Jewish identity.

With this act, we do more than show a history, we foresee the future, we foresee an emerging Jewish adult who will one day be a Jewish leader and who will carry the torch of Torah on her back and use its lessons to guide her life. To say the words *Am Yisrael Chai* is to know that Judaism lives on by what we pass on to our children.

By teaching our children, we enable them to have strong Jewish identities and we entrust the future of Jewish life to their hands and hearts. Ahad Ha’am, the father of cultural Zionism once wrote the following with the future of Jewish life in mind, “When a land is destroyed, there may yet arise a Zerubabel, an Ezra, a Nehemiah who could bring forth their people with them and restore the Land. But when a people is destroyed,” he wrote, “who can come to its rescue?” As a colleague and teacher of mine, Rabbi Ken Chasen, once responded to this question: The answer is no one. If our identity as Jews does not include a commitment that perpetuates the Jewish people who follow, we can be certain that there will be no Jewish people to come to its rescue.”

The essence of *Am Yisrael Chai* is in the people; it is ensuring that the next generation of Jews lives by the light of Torah and holds an unbreakable connection to Jewish brothers and sisters, here in America, in Israel and around the world. If we don't enable our children, then *Am Yisrael Chai* becomes something fragile.

The challenge for us is how we give our children this gift? I received a letter from Sophie Trauberman, one of our HS seniors our former Youth Group President and current regional president of NFTY-Southern California's region. She wrote, "Dear Rabbi Kellner, When you and Debra told me about the beauty and wonderfulness of Kutz [Camp], it was hard to imagine, but after my month there, I can't imagine having spent time anywhere else! I spent the month learning about how I can amplify my leadership skills; make my ideas stick in people's minds, the Reform Movement and so much more. In other words Kutz has made me feel incredibly prepared for the year ahead."

At 13 URJ camps and at other camps around the country, there is excitement and there is energy. They prepare kids for their life's journey. Just spend Shabbat in any one of these communities and you will know that the future of people is in good hands. Imagine kids and counselors, future Jewish leaders themselves, singing together, praying together, their arms wrapped around each other as they bless one another on Shabbat. Imagine your entire family eating together on Shabbat and multiply that by 50. That's what Shabbat at camp is, a family of 500 praying, eating, singing Jewish music and dancing to Israeli music together. Jewish summer camp is about building a better world by teaching our children what it means to connect with one another in a Jewish setting.

Jewish summer camp embodies the essence of *Am Yisrael Chai*. It is a place where Judaism comes to life.

Jewish summer camp was among the greatest experiences of my life. My rabbi of blessed memory, Rabbi Berger encouraged me to go to Jewish summer camp, he saw something in me and he knew that the experience would impact me. I have a strong connection to Judaism because of it. But more than that, he helped me become the Jew that I am and he helped me to know what it means to make Judaism come to life for future generations.

Camp is a celebration of all that is special and holy in Judaism. We celebrate our children at so many important moments during their lives. Each of these moments marks a milestone that should be treasured by everyone in the community for they are the true celebration of our future.

The notion of celebrating our children is even found in the darkest of times and the darkest of places in Jewish history. There is a story told by Elie Wiesel about how the Jewish community came to celebrate Simchat Torah in Auschwitz. On the night of Simchat Torah, what would the Jews of Auschwitz do to celebrate without a Torah scroll? How would they sing and dance without a Torah scroll? They turned to the rabbi and posed those questions, he then proceeded to pick up a child and dance around with him as if he were a Torah.

Our children are Torah scrolls; they are sacred. In each child is the future of *Am Yisrael Chai*. In each child is the secret of our people's life from Sinai until now. Our children are filled with love, justice, goodness and hope. Together as a community, we must nurture those qualities, so Judaism can come alive.