

The Next Generation

By Eli Birnbaum

The topic of the Next Generation is a popular one in the church today. Anthropologists, sociologists, and church leaders alike are all interested in being the academic prophets of our age, trying to divine from data and statistics the answers that will unlock the next generation. There is a library's worth of books on the subject that tell us, often quite categorically, what everybody my age and younger is interested in, passionate about, and how to get us to do things. There are even more tweets, blogs, posts, reviews and videos asking questions that refer to shocking attrition of millennials. This is not just a problem in our small Messianic Jewish world. This issue plagues the whole body of Christ.

The truth be told, I find myself a poor speaker for this generation because I am part of it. I don't have the objectivity of an academic, or the Word of the Lord to impart in this paper. However, what I have chosen to write are a few lessons that I have learned from my experience. Despite my youth, I have been involved in ministry for 15 years in Israel. I have seen some success in being able to recruit 7 full time missionaries, over 60 short term participants to discipleship and evangelism programs as well as numerous volunteers to be involved in different ministry efforts.

I will endeavour to use personal examples as well as biblical texts to explain what I feel have been important influences in my life. I will tell why I have been part of ministry and then why I definitely have not been part of ministry at different times in my life. What I have to say I hope and pray will help us all construct better programs, will help us grow in our faith in Messiah and our ministry to all people.

Let me just add, before we enter in to the body of this text, that all my experiences should be understood within their proper context. I am talking about millennials involved in Jewish ministry mostly in Israel but also in the USA.

A few leadership texts

Let's start, as we should, by looking at some passages in the Bible. In Numbers 11:25-30 we read about the Spirit of God falling upon the 70 elders of Israel. As the Spirit falls everyone begins to prophesy. However not everyone is at the tent of meeting with Moses and the elders. Eldad and Medad are doing things differently and are in the camp shewing forth the Word of God. This information reaches the long time approved minister of God, Joshua the son of Nun. The moment that Joshua hears that these two men are out in the camp when everyone else is at the tent he rushes to Moses. To Joshua, Moses is his mentor, his leader and not unlike a father figure. He runs to him so that the necessary punishment can be inflicted upon these breakers of convention. After all, they are not doing things the way Moses has explained.

In Mark 9:38-40 we see a similar situation arise among the disciples. Apparently, someone has witnessed the disciples casting out demons in the name of Jesus and decided that they could also have a go. This byproduct of Jesus' ministry among the afflicted of Galilee has reached the ears of the confirmed and official representatives of Jesus, i.e. the disciples. So they go quickly to Jesus in order to ensure that their Rabbi pronounce the end of such outrageous presumptions. After all, these new comers aren't following Jesus the way they are and are surely not doing things the way Jesus would want them done.

However, as you know from reading the texts in both the Tanach and the New Testament, that Moses and Jesus disappoint these zealous conservatives. Both of them respond by saying that their disciples should not be jealous or concerned for their image or ministry. These guys are doing the work of God; they are on the right path.

A world of WIFI

I am sure, as you prepare to come to Jerusalem for this LCJE conference that one of the emails you will send to the organizers or something that you will verify prior to arrival is whether or not there is WIFI available. All of us look for WIFI access wherever we go because it is the way that we connect to our spheres of influence and access the people and information we need. Access is important. To a millennial, there is never a moment that we are not accessible. As Jhan Moskowitz once described it to me, "in my generation when you asked us if we would conquer the hill, we would jump up and run, in your generation when you are asked to conquer the hill, you ask who is coming, and will there be WIFI"

As we read in the texts above, we can see that access to people was really important then. Joshua had access. One way that Moses prepared him to be the leader and person of God that he became was through giving him unfettered access to say and talk through anything. This is equally true of the disciples and Jesus. No matter how silly or trivial the topic, they walked, talked, ate and slept in the presence of the Word of God in the flesh.

In my youth I too had wonderful access to my youth leader. I felt complete ownership of our group because no matter what was going on I could contact him and talk. That connection provided me with the value and authenticity of relationship I needed. However when it came to the pastors in my congregation it was different. They would be open to meeting with me, but the meeting was cold and an appointment had to be made that gave a formality to it all. This is a relationship with someone that I was supposed to see as part of my "family".

I met Jhan only two years before he died. He was with the Jews for Jesus Young Adult program called Massah on a camping trip. Standing next to me as I barbecued the meat, he struck up a conversation and he wanted to talk to me. Over the next 2 years, every time he saw Shoshana or me he wanted to talk, he wanted to hear what I had to say about things. I regrettably don't remember many of the profound conversations. I just knew that he was a

friend to me. When I came over to his house he would offer me some wine or a cigar, and he genuinely wanted to be around people.

One thing refreshing about him was that he never pretended to be perfect. I saw him irritated, annoyed, and even saying things he shouldn't have, but every time I talked to him he was fully present. In my first year at Jews for Jesus, it was Jhan that was one of the first senior leaders I met and wished I could imitate.

It's the people who can have a beer with me, who would initiate the conversation, who would let me talk. Recently I got connected with a church planting network. I randomly met 3 of the older leaders on their way to hang out and have a beer. They wanted me to come along, and were genuinely interested in my context, my ministry and what I had to say. And guess what - I was interested and wanted to hear their advice. They didn't pretend to be perfect or spiritually superior; they were just followers of Jesus wanting to hear from another follower on a similar path. I don't think I could say this enough - Don't pretend to be perfect or list how many amazing things you have done. Young people know you aren't amazing. If we begin to think you are, you will just disappoint us. Be real, be genuine, and let us get to know you as you show us that you really want to know who we are.

Throughout the stories of the relationships between Moses and Joshua, or Jesus and the disciples we see this access. We see even more than that, we see a closeness and intimacy. If you want to have millennials engage with you in your ministry, if you want to have them own your vision, you need to provide them with access. No matter if it is WIFI, 3G or Indian smoke signals, they need to be part of your life the way Jesus was part of the disciples' lives.

Silos and Turf Wars

Patrick Lencioni has written an interesting little leadership parable called Silos and Turf Wars. We have sometimes given this book to missionary staff that is growing in their leadership abilities. It speaks to a problem that we see clearly in our passage. Both Jesus and Moses have to explain to their mentees that politics among ministries is not honoring of God. They did so by speaking to the heart of ministry politics: insecurity. They don't need to be protected and the other ministry going does not need to be reduced in value in order to validate their work and relationship with God.

At one of the congregations I attended as younger man there were three leaders, and each one during my time there approached me to begin a discipling relationship. Each time I agreed but each time it ended pretty quickly because each of them made the crucial mistake in ministry to a millennial. Each leader spent time in the meeting telling me how the other two leaders were not as good they were. Shocking? Unfortunately, not really shocking at all, but it is a lesson that I hope to communicate very clearly. The biggest turn off for every millennial is politics, silos and turf wars. Don't tell me why you're the best. Don't tell me why you're the biggest. Don't tell how you're the first. Tell me how you want to serve God and show me that in the way you speak about God and others.

This is one of the greatest lessons we can learn about serving the younger generation because it forces us to repent of rivalry and focus on Jesus. The Gospel speaks profoundly to any sense of self-importance we may be cultivating in the petri dish of our hearts. Jesus has given you everything. From justification to sanctification and through to glorification we are entirely reliant on the grace of Jesus provided by the only achievement that means anything – the death and resurrection of Messiah.

One of the worst encounters with this kind of behavior I ever experienced was at a youth conference. I had received the lessons for the conference beforehand so I was flicking through and preparing when I came across something I thought was a little off. When I mentioned this to the leadership of the event there were a lot of negative reactions. I was told that to question the Bible lesson was a sign of a rebelliousness and that I shouldn't challenge our leaders. A big meeting was held after I had already apologized numerous times, I again apologized because of all the pressure bearing down on me; even after the lesson was changed and people agreed with the point I had made. At the conference itself I was even 'demoted' from counselor to assistant counselor so that I 'learned my lesson' and then asked never to come back.

But, but... that isn't the way we do things!

God does wonders and He has worked through so many people in so many different ways. The Lausanne Movement exemplifies the concept of all these different methods being brought together in one broad network to demonstrate and strengthen the diversity of God's people in evangelism. However, so many ministries once used by God in a certain way for a certain period of can stop there. Despite the diversity around us and even the opposition some of us experienced when we first started out in our new way of doing things, we can stick to our guns to the bitter end.

God was clearly working among the 68 elders that stood at the tent of meeting with Moses. Yet it is idolatry to suggest that it is the tent of meeting or the words of Moses that provide that power or authority. Even being in physical proximity to the Son of God is not necessary for God to work through you, which the disciples discovered in Mark. Every time we put God in a box He will find a way to show us that He can break our mold, he will break our idols.

Young people will often come up with new ideas. Some of the bravest ones will actually put them into practice. If we crush them, push them away and patronize them because we always think we know better we are losing one of the most precious fountains of creativity. If we are doing so to perpetuate our idolatry of methodology then we are in sin. The body of Christ must become a place where people are allowed to try new things, learn together, and even fail so that God can use our weakness and raise us up.

As a teenager I wanted to have an all-night prayer meeting with other young members of our congregation. We wanted the prayer night to be without adults. When the request was made to use the premises the reaction seemed to us quite explosive. Reactions such as accusations of rebellion because we didn't want adults around came at us. I was told in a meeting by a leader in the church that an adult

had to be present. He didn't offer to come, nor did he seem interested in encouraging us. He just wanted it under control.

There are many times when new people come up with strange ideas or thoughts that you may have even tried before. Your instinct might be to react, explain why it won't work, in order to help 'guide' the inexperienced youth. You may even be right. However each time a young person is shut down, even in the gentlest fashion, they become much less likely to either work with you or mention their next idea. It is far better to try, experiment and help them process what went well and what did not.

We tried art galleries in Tel Aviv a while back with no idea as to whether it will help in reaching out to our southern Tel Aviv community. Recently over 300 Israelis who do not know Jesus came to one event. Some people felt that ministry to Israelis in India was a fool's errand. Now several ministries engage backpackers all over the subcontinent. Why were we able to do these things? Because, my boss, and his boss, allowed young people to do something new. Even though they didn't understand it fully, and after others criticized it - they were willing to take that risk.

I want to encourage you to humbly put aside what you have done, and help the young people around you to try what they believe might work as well as help you do what you are doing. If they are doing it by themselves then let them, enabling and empowering them may be easier than you think.

Conclusion

The young people in our churches, communities and ministries are not hard to spend time with. They want to know you and about you. They want to be inspired. Yet, like God, they don't care about your achievements. They don't want your bio, they want you, your time and your friendship. Authenticity and vulnerability are rare qualities to be found in 'today's market of ministry', that is why they are prized above all others. You can't say the right thing to young people.

As we all fall short in these areas, it is important to remember the Gospel. If we rely entirely on the accessibility of God that was expressed in the incarnation of Jesus, then we can by his grace be accessible to others. If we remember that the true king became vulnerable and gave up his cosmic control so that we could be redeemed, we will allow the politics and our inner struggle to "be in control" fall away so that we can be of his kingdom. And if we recall that Jesus is our redeemer, and not our methods, then we can release our clinging to methods as a way of saving ourselves and be free to live for God.

I hope that despite the frank brevity that forms my thoughts that you take them to heart. If we want to recruit the next generation we need to be accessible, avoid the insecurity filled politics, and open our hearts and calendar to new initiatives.