

The mitzvah of remembering - זכור

erev Rosh HaShanah 5771

Introductory

Elie Wiesel tells this story:

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov
saw misfortune threatening the Jews
it was his custom
to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate.
There he would light a fire,
say a special prayer,
and the miracle would be accomplished,
and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple,
the celebrated Magid of Mezritch,
had occasion, for the same reason,
to intercede with heaven,
he would go to the same place in the forest
and say: "Master of the Universe, listen!
I do not know how to light the fire,
but I am still able to say the prayer."
And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later,
Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov,
in order to save his people once more,
would go into the forest and say:
"I do not know how to light the fire,
I do not know the prayer,
but I know the place
and this must be enough."
It was enough, and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn
to overcome misfortune.
Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands,
he spoke to God:
"I am unable to light the fire
and I do not know the prayer;
I cannot even find the place in the forest.
[But I remember how to] tell the story,
and this must be enough."
And it was enough.¹

¹ Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*, introduction.

Remembering is essential. It is how we know who we are, and how we know others, and love them - or hate them. But we forget. A person with Alzheimer's disease forgets, and slowly she does not know who she is, or who you are - even if you are her most beloved. We forget, and so the Torah commands "Remember!" and our rituals prescribe "when your children ask you 'what does this mean?' on that day you shall tell them..."

Who are we if we do not remember where we are from? Who are we if we are not remembered? We pray the *Yizkor* prayer for those we love who are gone. The prayer tells us that we are what we remember...and that we will be what is remembered about us.

What do we remember - and will it be enough?

One gathers one's thoughts for a drash like this by researching certain genres of literature: Talmud, Midrash, Google; here are the first hits I got when googling "Memory":

1. RAM memory upgrade for your computer
2. wikipedia's definition: "an organism's ability to store, retain, and recall information."
3. Kingston: manufacturer of memory products for desktops, notebooks, servers, and workstations.
4. memory.com: computer RAM memory upgrade
5. The Memory Exhibition: explores the biological, psychological, and cultural aspects of memory
6. an animated memory game
7. Medline Plus: "memory doesn't always work perfectly. As people grow older, it may take longer to retrieve those files."

.....and number 13: "Memory, all alone in the moonlight, I can smile at the old days, I was beautiful then...."

1. *memory is important*

Remembering is extremely important in the Torah. After a thorough and careful reading of our sacred text, one might even come to the conclusion that memory is what saves our lives.

The verb *zakhar*, referring to memory, appears in the Tanakh 169 times in various declensions and conjugations, often accompanied by the injunction not to forget. Remember, don't forget....

What does the Torah - that is, God - command us to remember? You probably know most of these already, by heart.

Shemot

1. זכור את היום הזה אשר יצאתם ממצרים מבית עבדים (13.3) remember this day on which you went out of Egypt, the place of bondage
2. זכור את יום השבת לקדשו - ששת ימים תעבוד ועשית כל מלאכתך - ויום השביעי שבת (20.8) remember the Shabbat and set it apart; work for six days, the seventh is Shabbat

Devarim

1. זכור את אשר עשה ה' אלהיך למרים בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים (24.9) remember what H your God did to Miriam on the path of your escape from Egypt.
2. זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים (25.17) remember what Amalek did to you on the path of your escape from Egypt

These are examples of what we might say are God's statements to us about the importance of memory. Our escape from Egypt occupies a central place. Psalms, especially, of all the other ancient books outside the Torah, might be said to contain the human response:

Psalm 103.14: כי הוא ידע יצרנו זכור כי עפר אנחנו - The One who created us knows us - remember that we are dust.

We tell God to remember, too. Jews have always understood that memory is a two-way street, and we have sought to use that to our advantage. Rashi, the great medieval Torah teacher, describes a use of memory which has become very much a part of these Days of Awe:

זָכוֹר לְאַבְרָהָם. אִם עָבְרוּ עַל עֲשֵׂרֵת הַדְּבָרוֹת, אַבְרָהָם אָבִיהֶם נִתְנַסָּה בְּעֵשֶׂר נִסְיוֹנוֹת וְעֵדִין לְאַזְכוֹר לְאַבְרָהָם. אִם עָבְרוּ עַל עֲשֵׂרֵת הַדְּבָרוֹת, אַבְרָהָם אָבִיהֶם נִתְנַסָּה בְּעֵשֶׂר נִסְיוֹנוֹת וְעֵדִין לֹא קָבַל שְׂכָרוֹ, תְּנָהוּ לוֹ, וַיֵּצְאוּ עֵשֶׂר בְּעֵשֶׂר (ש"ר מד:ד): לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלִישָׂרָאֵל. אִם לְשִׁרְפָה הֵם, זָכוֹר לְאַבְרָהָם שֶׁמָסַר עַצְמוֹ לְהַשְׁרִיף עָלָיו בְּאוּר כְּשָׂדִים. אִם לְהָרִיגָה, זָכוֹר לְיִצְחָק שֶׁפָּשַׁט צְוָארוֹ לְעַקְדָה. אִם לְגִלוֹת, זָכוֹר לְיַעֲקֹב שֶׁגָּלָה לְחָרֹן (שם מד:ה). וְאִם אֵינָן נִצּוּלִין בְּזִכְרוֹתָן, מָה אַתָּה אוֹמֵר לִי "וְאַעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָךְ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל", וְאִם כִּסָּא שֶׁל שְׁלֹשׁ רַגְלִים אֵינָן עוֹמֵד לְפָנֶיךָ בְּשַׁעַת כְּעֶסֶךָ, קַל וְחֹמֶר לְכַסּוֹת שֶׁל רַגְלֵי אַחַת (ברכות לב ע"א

Rashi writes:

"Remember Abraham" we say in our High Holy Days liturgy: we may have transgressed ten commandments, but he withstood ten tests without receiving his reward. Reward him by forgiving us, his descendants. Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: save us from fire by the memory of the fire Abraham went through for his belief; save us from murder

by the memory of Isaac, who suffered through the Akedah; save us from exile, by the memory of Jacob, who wandered far from home.²

According to this ancient Jewish tradition, memory can literally save our lives. Memory, and that which proceeds from it.

Another example: In the book of Deuteronomy, in chapter 16, we are commanded to come before God three times a year, at the Festivals, and: יראה כל זכורך את פני ה' אלהיך "all your *zakhur* will see the face of HaShem your God". This verse is typically translated as "all your males will see God". Now, I need to ask you to suspend whatever astonishment you may be experiencing at the idea that in our very own book of Deuteronomy it is actually rather casually mentions that three times a year all Israelite men will see God in the Temple in Jerusalem; rather I ask that you concentrate your attention on a different word in the verse, the word that is usually translated "males". *Zakhar* does mean "male" in Hebrew; but listen to the similarity to the word for the command to remember: *zakhar*, "male"; *zakhor*, "remember".

What if *zakhur* and *zakhor* are not different words here, not homonyms; what would the verse say if we understood here an imperative for memory, rather than men? There is a hint here in the text, a suggestion that *zakhur* does not mean "men", but refers to those who remember.

Zakhur here, then, means "those who see God". It refers to those who on the Holy Days see what is important: the holy, innermost point of life. That vision open the door to memory, and memory compels them to come: to see and be seen, not by others but by God....and to see God.³ To see God, after all, is to see, deeply and truly, into oneself. Beyond veils, beyond self-defense mechanisms. Memory saves our lives because it is the gateway into seeing that which is true.

² Rashi, *Shemot* 32.13

³ *Sefat Emet*, Rosh HaShanah

2. *we forget*

The great historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi wrote that memory is a difficult and fragile thing. “It is ... common experience that what is remembered is not always recorded, and...that much of what has been recorded is not necessarily remembered.”⁴

Not everyone cares about memory. The Greeks, who “invented” the idea of recording stories and calling them history, did not seek eternal truth in history. It is the Jews who seek meaning in history. Yerushalmi writes:

even God is known only insofar as God is revealed ‘historically’....When God [is] introduce[d] ... directly to the entire people at Sinai, nothing is heard of ... essence or attributes, but only: “I YHVH am your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, ...: (Exod. 20.2). That is sufficient. For here as elsewhere, ancient Israel knows what God is from what [God] has done in history. And if that is so, then memory has become crucial to its faith and, ultimately, to its very existence.”⁵

Because I believe that this is true, I have proposed that Shir Tikvah’s study theme for this year be an exploration of the mitzvah, the religious obligation, of *Zakhor*, “remember”. We will explore its interpretations and implications in *divre* Torah on erev Shabbat, in Nashira Project lessons for you and your children, and in holy day settings such as Pesakh - that ultimate demonstration of the importance of memory.

I’ve always wondered about the deeper significance of the central mitzvah of Pesakh, which is, of course, to tell the story of our people’s memory of Egypt and the Exodus. Musing upon the verse “you shall teach your child on that day” the rabbis of antiquity extrapolated the following religious obligation:

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים
“In every generation, each of us is obligated to see ourselves as if we ourselves came out of Egypt.”⁶

⁴ *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, p. 5-6.

⁵ Yerushalmi, p. 9.

⁶ M *Pesakhim* 116b

What I wonder about is why they insist that we see ourselves as having literally experienced the Exodus. I suggest that the key may be in a bit of wordplay. We can see in the English word *remember* two words: re-member. To re-member is to replace lost members, to fill out a truncated body with arms and legs, the famous Venus de Milo statue, for example. Poor thing can't even talk, with no arms.

Seriously, if you take away my hands I can't express myself in all the non-verbal ways of gesture and movement that we human beings know and use so well. How much of a body can be taken away before it cannot communicate? Think of the story of the special place in the forest, the prayer, and the fire. What frightened each rabbi in turn was the question of how much of that ritual can be dis-membered - un-re-membered - before the ritual no longer has significance?

Once upon a time, several years ago, I had a conversation with a bat mitzvah candidate who didn't see any relevance in reading from the Torah scroll; after all, she and her family don't daven regularly. All right, I said, I can go there with you. What WOULD have similar - Jewish - communal - relevance?

You see, once upon a time, the shul was the public square for Jews; it's where we saw each other, where we gathered for anything that was important. Such as reading the Torah; such as recognizing the entrance into maturity of one of our members. Naturally, if one loses the part of the body that was davening with the community, one has dis-membered that connection. There's nothing there. Well, maybe a ghost memory, like the ghost itch that some feel in an amputated limb. Maybe the ghost itch is why people who aren't involved in shul-based community nevertheless have to tell me how much it doesn't mean to them.

We are commanded to see ourselves as having come out of Egypt ourselves. That memory is supposed to be more than a half-articulate itch. And here is the difference: you can know the story, but if you don't remember it and tell it yourself and feel it inside you and know

that this memory is part of what makes you YOU, if it doesn't make you itch - if it hasn't become a part of you - then it is not part of the members of your identity, and you, I'm afraid, are not part of the re-membering, and transmission, of the story.

The lesson taught by those who suffer from forgetting, from dementia in any form, is this: there is a narrative that we belong to, a story we are a part of. But we forget. At some level, many of us are suffering from a spiritual sort of Alzheimer's. We are dis-membered. We have forgotten a good deal of what we knew - and sometimes when we find ourselves in a place that we should remember, something still stirs inside - a ghost itch. But is it enough?

In the Pesakh Seder, the child asks "what does this mean?" Can we give a real answer, that we can feel in our bones, and that remembers us as we remember it? Why is the act of remembering a central religious obligation for Jews; why are we to remember Creation, and the Exodus from Egypt, with every Kiddush? How is it that remembering is part of the act of sanctification; that remembering becomes a holy act?

It is because memory is the reflection between Creator and Creation. It is a reverberating wave that pulsates just as sound waves do, carrying the story of who we are from one to the next: each individual soul illuminating the darkness of existence with stories that carry our shared meaning, and thus, all of us create our memory of who we are as a people.

Curiously, we are also sometimes commanded to remember to forget. Sometimes in the course of the ebb and flow of relationships, forgetting, letting something go, is the wisest and most compassionate act. Memory is a creation made of many parts, balanced with compassion, haunted by longing. Memory is not passive; it is not boring.

Memory is not even just a mental state. In the Hebrew mindset of the Torah, when the narrative mentions remembering, there is an assumption that a physical act will follow; God "remembers" the Jewish people in their Egyptian enslavement, and the wheel of redemption begins to turn. God "remembers" Sarah's childlessness, and Isaac is born. Remembering the

past, paradoxically, is the necessary prelude to the future: to something new emerging into the world: a baby, or the birth of freedom for a people.

Memory, then, is not a passive experience of reverie. For Jews, to remember is to act as a result of remembering. We honor those we remember when we act as they would have, and when we do the deeds for which they were role models. Each one who is remembered in this way fulfills the verse: נְשִׁמַת אָדָם נֵר ה', *nishmat adam ner HaShem*, “the human soul is God’s illumination.”⁷ From this verse we learn that we human beings tell the story that remembers God, too.

3. *we are what we remember*

Much of the meaning of a human life derives from what is remembered. For Jews, what we remember shapes how we know ourselves, as individuals, and as a community of those individuals. Those who are older than us tell us the stories of our earliest days, and the stories in which we participate lay the foundation for what we become.

In this sense, to remember is to create. And in the multi-generational story of our people, we find ourselves named and defined in far more profound ways than one single family, or one simple community, can ever know. Perhaps this is why a bat mitzvah, or a baby, or a couple getting married, come before the congregation for a ritual moment of recognition: we define each of us who is a part of us. We, and the story we share, are a collective anchor for each of us who finds a place within it.

And so each time we welcome Shabbat or a holy day we remind ourselves of the story of Creation, and the Exodus from Egypt, which was the creation of our people. With each act of re-remembering we re-create the world, and ourselves. When we participate in remembering, and

⁷ *Proverbs 20.27*

are ourselves re-membered, we are grounded, and fundamentally supported, by a story to which we belong.

Memory - our collective memory - saves us in another way. It is taught that we were rescued from Egypt because we remembered that we were not Egyptians. According to the Midrash, Jewish mothers kept giving their children Hebrew names. All these generations later, a child asks “what is this?” and we answer with a story of Jewish memory, we are helping that child to actualize his Jewish name. To give a Jewish name is to open a door; to remember what it means is to enter that doorway.

In our tradition, even God has a name, and we need to know it. Name and memory are linked. Both God and humanity must remember for the story to be told. And both we and God need to be remembered. Just as we stood at Sinai together to enter into the covenant, our personal experience of God in Jewish history is a story remembered and told by the other individuals with whom we stand before God.

But there is a decline in Jewish collective memory in modern times, even as there is a decline in Jewish collective experience. And our shared story has always depended upon shared experience in our public square, whether it be the shul or some other Jewish collective.⁸ Jewish membership in a collective, in a shul like ours, for example, offers you the chance to participate in re-membering, and to be re-membered. Through the stories we tell, and the memories we share, you fill out your Jewish identity, and you inhabit your Jewish name. Take a bit of time on this New Year to ask yourself this question: how does membership in the Jewish community help you re-member yourself? What Jewish stories can you tell *k’ilu hu yatza miMitzrayim*, as if you yourself came out of Egypt? as if you yourself were there, and your life,

⁸ “The collective memories of the Jewish people were a function of the shared faith, cohesiveness, and will of the group itself, transmitting and recreating its past through an entire complex of interlocking social and religious institutions that functioned organically to achieve this...” Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, p. 89?

and its meaning, depends upon it. What do you remember in your own bones? You may not have actually been there, but nevertheless, it is part of what you are.

There is a wonderful funny bit about one Jew who meets another and, after some conversation, says, “you know, you seem very familiar to me, but I can’t quite place where it is that we’ve met before.” The other Jew smiles and says, “no doubt it was at Sinai that you remember seeing me.”

Remember William Faulkner’s warning: “the past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past.”⁹ So much will haunt us, against our will, perhaps to no good purpose. There is an ethics of memory which derives from the commandment to remember. There is much to learn and practice. And so it is that memory will save us. Our memories, which we relate in a thousand Jewish stories: Creation, Abraham and Sarah, the Exodus and Sinai, Wandering, Arriving, Rebellion, *Teshuvah*, and Revelation. Stories which allow us to be remembered as part of the story.

Stories are for joining the past to the future.

Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can’t remember how you got from where you were to where you are.

Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story.”¹⁰

What do you re-member? What re-members you? What story is your life telling?

Will it be enough?

⁹ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, 1951.

¹⁰ Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 1986, p. 40.