

\*Yom Kippur 5772-2011

On Memory...

The verb *zachor* – to remember –  
appears no less than 169 times in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>1</sup>  
We are commanded, over and over again, to remember.

To remember the Sabbath day.  
To remember that we were slaves in the land of Egypt.  
To remember what Amalek did to us.

To remember is the Jewish occupation.  
In fact, it has been said,  
that the greatest sin a Jew can commit  
is to forget who she is.<sup>2</sup>

And so....  
    we light candles and bless wine to remember.  
    we eat matzah to remember.  
    we tell stories to remember.  
    we fast to remember.

Most of our Jewish holidays are about remembering...  
    at Purim, we remember the near destruction of the Jews  
    at the hands of Haman,  
    at Chanukkah, we remember the near destruction of the Jews  
    at the hands of the Assyrians,  
    at Passover, we remember the near destruction of the Jews  
    at the hands of the Egyptians.

Is it any wonder that one of the greatest jokes about Jewish holidays is:  
They tried to kill us.  
We survived.  
Let's eat!

But at this holiday, we don't even get to eat!

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\*This sermon would not have been possible without the help of rabbinical student Nicole Roberts, who served as Micah's rabbinic intern this summer and worked on our Elul project, whose subject was memory.

<sup>1</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Seymour Siegel, *Moments of Transcendence: Inspirational Readings for Rosh Hashanah*, Ed. Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, p. 180.

At least not till the end...

During these high holydays,  
we don't remember some story of our near death,  
and the victory we waged under some fearless leader,  
rather, we ask God to remember US

**zochreinu l'chayim, we plead**  
remember us for life, we beg,  
and we too are called upon to remember,  
to remember who we are,  
to remember who we wish to be,  
to remember our misdeeds and transgressions,  
and commit to a better future.

**We consider memory a blessing.**

When we hear of someone's death,  
we say to the mourners 'may their memory be for a blessing.'  
We hope that although the loved one is no longer physically present with us,  
the memory of that person...

who she was,  
how he loved,  
what she taught  
will be a blessing, a comfort,  
will be life sustaining to us.

It is through memory that we give our loved ones  
a sense of immortality.

We love them beyond the grave.  
We remember them at Yizkor,  
during their Yartzheits.  
Our remembrances of them  
bring them closer to us.

Memory is the tool we use to teach our children,  
and the next generation,  
about their past,  
and about their future.  
We turn the events of the past into something that they experience.  
It is why we say at the Passover seder,  
each of us has to feel as if we were a slave in Egypt.  
We turn history into memory,

hoping that are children and grandchildren  
will become Jews in the process.

Memory is the way we remember who we are,  
where we live, where we were born, our names.  
Who would we be without our memories?  
Would we exist, even?

In her book, My Stroke of Insight,  
Jill Bolte-Taylor describes what it was like  
to lose her sense of self  
in the early moments of her stroke:  
“...I realized that my ability to interact with the external world  
had deteriorated far more than I could ever have imagined.  
My grip on normal reality had been all but peeled away....  
Coupled with my loss of long-term and short-term memories,  
I no longer felt grounded or safe in the external world.  
What a daunting task it was to simply sit there in the center of my silent mind,  
holding that stack of cards and trying to remember,  
*Who am I? What am I doing?*”<sup>3</sup>

When we lose our memory,  
we recognize how much we rely upon it to navigate the world,  
and our place in it.  
We recognize how much a blessing memory can be.

And yet....  
Could there be such a thing as ‘too much’ memory?  
Could there be a danger in ‘too much’ remembering?  
Can memory ever be a curse?

There is a woman, a Jewish woman in fact,  
who suffers from such a problem,  
which has been diagnosed as hyperthymesia.  
Jill Price,  
in her book The Woman Who Can’t Forget,  
describes how she has vivid memories of each day of her life,  
since the age of 14.  
She is currently 45.

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<sup>3</sup> Jill Bolte-Taylor, My Stroke of Insight, p. 57 (emphasis hers)

Give her a date, and she can tell you what happened on that date,  
what she was doing, what she was wearing,  
what she ate.

Her memories "...are like scenes from home movies"  
of every day of her life,  
"...flashing forward and backward through the years relentlessly,  
...entirely of their own volition."<sup>4</sup>

Price says that the constant onslaught of memories is both a curse and a blessing.  
Under stress, the good memories give her great comfort.  
The dark side is that she recalls every bad decision,  
every insult and excruciating embarrassment.  
She says it has paralyzed her life.<sup>5</sup>

She writes in her book,  
"It's as though I have all of my prior selves still inside me,  
the self I was on every day of my life, like her or not, nested as in a Russian doll—  
inside today's Jill are complete replicas of yesterday's Jill  
and the Jills for all the days stretching so far back in time."

Jill Price can never forget who she was on any given day.  
It sounds exhausting.

Although most of us don't suffer in the exact way  
that Jill Price suffers,  
might we too have the curse of 'too much memory'  
as Jews and as individuals?

Does 'too much memory,'  
remembering every attack perpetrated against our people,  
prevent us from making peace with our enemies?

Does 'too much memory,'  
of our exile and victimhood over thousands of years,  
freeze our collective image into those of victims?

Does 'too much memory,'

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2008-05-07-cant-forget-price\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2008-05-07-cant-forget-price_N.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Jill Price, The Woman Who Can't Forget: The Extraordinary Story of Living with the Most Remarkable Memory Known to Science, p. 6

of how we acted in the past,  
of our transgressions and imperfections,  
prevent us from having the courage to begin again?  
Does 'too much memory,'  
of every hurt we've experienced,  
of every fight with a spouse, parent or friend  
of every break up and blow up,  
prevent us from forgiving and moving forward?  
Does 'too much memory'  
of past sadness and anxiety  
prevent us from ever being happy?  
Does 'too much memory'  
of every failed dream  
prevent us from dreaming again?

We consider memory a blessing,  
but might it also be a curse?

**Might there also be a blessing in forgetting?**

We wandered for 40 years in the desert,  
in order for the generation of the exodus,  
those who had suffered as slaves,  
could die out before entering the Promised Land.  
It was to be their children,  
the generation born into the freedom of the desert,  
who would inherit the land.

Why?

Because the generation of the exodus didn't understand  
one fundamental and precious fact-  
"We need not be bound by the conditions of our birth  
or the circumstances of the past.  
Slavery is a condition, not an identity."<sup>6</sup>  
In order to establish a new home for the Jewish people,  
a home defined by possibility, imagination, and adventure,

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<sup>6</sup>Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, The Tapestry of Jewish Time: A Spiritual Guide to Holidays and Life-Cycle Events, p. 84

it needed to be led by a generation  
who were not imprisoned to their past selves,  
who did not know slavery.

In essence,  
despite all of our commands to  
‘remember when you were slaves in Egypt’  
we had to **‘forget’** the experience of slavery  
in order to establish a new land.  
We had to ‘erase,’ if you will,  
our identity as slaves  
in order to become free men and women.

A forgetting of the past in order to forge a new future.  
And just as we are the descendants of that generation,  
so too must we, at times, forget our past in order to forge a new future.  
Forget the identities that enslave us, forget the memories that paralyze us.

In fact, we teach in our tradition that when someone converts,  
and chooses to join the Jewish people,  
we should never remind them of their past, before they were Jews.  
We must consider them as if they were Jews from the very beginning.  
Forget the past in order to forge a new future.

**We consider memory a blessing,  
but forgetting carries with it blessings as well.**

And yet....  
just as there can be ‘too much memory,’ ‘too much remembering’  
there can also be such a thing as ‘too much forgetting.’

The Torah records the word *zachor* – to remember  
close to 169 times.

And the word forget?

The instances of the word forget in the Hebrew Bible,  
are actually an admonition – **do not forget**.

In the book of Deuteronomy,  
we are warned:

“Take care lest you forget the Eternal your God  
and fail to keep His commandments, His rules, His laws...

Beware lest your heat grow haughty  
and you forget the Eternal your God....  
If you do forget the Eternal your God...  
I warn you this day that you shall certainly perish.” (Deuteronomy 8:11-19)

In the Bible, forgetting leads to death.

For the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism,  
forgetting can also lead to exile.<sup>7</sup>  
When we were exiled from our land in 586 BCE,  
we blamed it on idol worship, sexual promiscuity and murder.  
When we were exiled from our land in 70 CE,  
we blamed it on the senseless hatred we had for each other,  
Jews killing Jews.  
In other words, we were exiled from the land  
because we had forgotten our covenant with God,  
We had forgotten about the mitzvot,  
we had forgotten about our covenant with each other.  
We had forgotten what it meant to be a Jew.

Just as ‘too much memory’ can be a curse,  
so can ‘too much forgetting.’

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur,  
we recite the *Unetaneh Tokef*:  
“And You will remember everything that has been forgotten,  
And You will open the book of memories.  
And it will be read from:  
Everyone’s signature is in it.”

We say these words to God.  
You God are the repository of all memories.  
You God will remember everything that has been forgotten.  
But as Rabbi Noa Kushner reminds us,  
“We cannot read these words without addressing ourselves as well,  
because it is precisely in saying this very prayer  
that we ourselves are forced to remember  
everything we would rather forget.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Moments of Transcendence: Inspirational Readings for Rosh Hashanah*, Ed. Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, p. 180

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Noa Kushner in, *Who by Fire, Who By Water: Un'taneh Tokef*, Edited by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, p. 65-66.

**This is the season for remembering,**

for remembering the ways we hurt people,  
for the ways we did not live up to our promise,  
for remembering our mistakes,  
for remembering the vows we didn't keep.  
We remember in order to confess.  
We remember in order to seek forgiveness.  
We remember so we won't allow our personal histories to repeat themselves.

**But this is also the season for forgetting,**

to forget the ways we've been hurt by others,  
to forget promises made to us and broken,  
to forget the faults of those we love.  
We forget in order to forge a new future,  
to forge anew relationships that have been broken.

**That is the challenge**

**to remember what needs remembering  
and forgetting what needs forgetting.**

Since most of the time,  
we remember how we've been wronged,  
and forget how we've hurt.  
We remember the pain,  
but forget the friendship.  
We remember the fights,  
but forget the kisses.  
We remember the bitter,  
but forget the sweet.

Rather,  
may the memory of darkness  
help us to choose light –  
and the memory of curse  
help us to choose blessing-  
and the memory of death-  
help us to choose life...  
that we may live, all of us,  
us and our offspring.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Adapted from a poem by Karyn Kedar in The Bridge to Forgiveness: stories and prayers for finding God and restoring wholeness, p. 36.