

## **Memory and Identity**

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I've been thinking a lot about memory recently, but I can't remember why. Sorry. That is a cheap laugh. Here is a better one. Three elderly people are sharing with one another the trials of aging. One says: "Sometimes I catch myself standing in front of the refrigerator with a jar of mayonnaise in my hand and I can't remember if I need to put it away or start making a sandwich." The second person chimes in: "I sometimes find myself on the landing of my stairs and I can't remember if I am on my way up or on my way down." The third one speaks up: "Well I am sure glad that I don't have those problems, knock on wood." ... "That must be the door; I'll get it."

It actually is not only older people who are at risk of memory loss. New studies are revealing that our newfound habit to store and retrieve information via our laptops and smartphones is seriously compromising our ability to memorize things. I believe it. At the Conservative *shul* of my childhood, Mr. Drexler, an elderly Holocaust survivor, read Torah every Shabbat. We did the full *parsha*. It turns out he had memorized the entire Five Books of Moses along with the appropriate *trup*. I don't think Mr. Drexler even finished high school. Compare that to the following: A few weeks ago Sandy and I rented bikes in Central Park from the bike share dock and we could not remember the five digit passcode the kiosk spit out without writing it down. We have fallen a long way baby!

What fascinates me about memory is how powerfully it shapes our identity. It shapes how we behave. It shapes who we want to be. It shapes how we want to grow and change. I'd like to explore the idea with you in three dimensions: group identity; family identity and personal identity. For each, I will suggest some action items that will be your take-home assignment for the coming year.

### **Group Identity**

Each of us identifies with multiple groups—political, cultural, gender and many more. Tonight, for obvious reasons, I want to focus on how we identify as members of the Jewish people.

The Rabbis of the Talmud understood how important it was to have Jews of each generation identify with the historical story of the Jewish people. This is why they taught that every Jew, in every age, must see themselves as having stood at Mt. Sinai, receiving the Torah from God. I identify with this teaching even though I do not believe that Exodus ch. 19 is an accurate rendition of the event. I relate to the story instead because it tells me that core to being a Jew is to feel commanded by an aspirational sacred text that we call Torah. And even as we must re-interpret parts of that Torah to make sure that it is consistent with the highest standards of ethical and moral behavior of our time, to be a Jew means that I am not free to ignore that founding document of our heritage.

Similarly, there is a teaching from the Rabbis that is central to the Haggadah of Passover. Each Jew must see himself/herself as if they experienced the exodus from Egyptian slavery. Now

historically, that is patently false. But psychologically, it is brilliant. To be a Jew is to identify with a history that moves from slavery to freedom, *m'avdut l'cherut*, from oppression to redemption. And that historical arc, an arc that in the words of Martin Luther King, "bends towards justice," did not only happen once in our history, but it has happened again and again. **The fact that so many Jews have been in the forefront of efforts to advance social justice in the world is because Jews took a memory that was intended to be descriptive of the Jewish historical experience and they sought to make it prescriptive of how we need to behave in the world.**

We should take pride in the fact that the imperative to advance peace and justice in the world has become part of the Jewish DNA. I am convinced that this is one of the reasons why in a recent study of American religion, Jews emerged as the most highly admired religious community in the United States. **We walk the talk, at least most of the time.**

But it also explains why we become so acutely uncomfortable when Jews act in ways that violate our collective memory of being a people committed to justice. This happens when we read that 7 out of the 10 worst slumlords in New York are Jewish; or when a Jewish organization honors a Jew who has gotten wealthy through questionable financial transactions; or when Israel acts in a way that violates our sense of justice and fairness.

**Let me suggest four action items that will strengthen this memory muscle:** We can actually "create memories" that will add to our identification with the Jewish people.

- 1- Make Jewish-themed books, songs, theatre and cinema part of your regular cultural habit;
- 2- Develop innovative, fun and creative ways to observe Jewish holidays in your home with others you invite to your home;
- 3- If you travel to a foreign country make a point to visit the local synagogue and connect with the local Jewish community; and
- 4- Visit Israel regularly and, if that is beyond your budget, find ways to stay abreast of Israeli news and culture.

### **Family Identity**

Families are complicated. I say that aware that a lot of people are here today with extended families. As with Thanksgiving, Passover and other major times of family gathering there is a lot of drama around whom to invite, who will eventually attend and with what kind of attitude they will show up. In every family there are layers of emotional baggage that keep half this room employed.

I remember in the early years of Adat Shalom I gave a sermon entitled: "Families: Surviving the Relationship". The message was essentially how important it is that we seek to heal the breaches that happen in our families. On the receiving line a female guest pulled me close with a firm handshake and said in my ear, "If you knew what my mother did to me you would not have given that sermon!" Live and learn.

But in fact, that is the point. We are shaped by things said and done by our parents and how we remember those words and events. Sometimes a memory scars us for life; other times a memory can give us the inspiration to do great things. Sometimes we seek to follow in the footsteps of

our parents. Sometimes we consciously try to move in other directions. When many of us started to have kids we became aware that parenting is one tough job. It is challenging to know how to give our children sufficient direction but also to allow them enough space to become who they are destined to be.

I know of a female rabbi who grew up attending *shul* with her grandmother. Her grandmother's piety inspired her decision to pursue the rabbinate, a choice unavailable to her Bubbe. When her grandmother died the rabbi, who did not serve a congregation, decided to buy an extra seat on the High Holidays for her grandmother. The seat stayed empty of course but it was the rabbi's way of honoring the powerful role model that her Bubbe was for her. The empty seat became a memory trigger for something very special. I suspect that for many of you there is an empty seat next to you right now, maybe not actually, but in your heart. And in that seat is a loved one who is no longer alive whose life offered you comfort, direction and love. **Take a moment to remember and honor that person now.**

Some of you know that my father died this past year. When I was a child, my dad would pull me aside before Kol Nidre and ask forgiveness for anything he might have said or done that was hurtful to me. It was pretty powerful. At age 8 your dad is next to perfect. When I got a bit older, I understood how my dad's practice connected to the spirit of the High Holydays and I reciprocated the gesture. It became an annual ritual for us in the hours before the start of Kol Nidre. **Tonight is the first time I didn't have that conversation with my father in 52 years. But I did it with my children, which is exactly how family legacies get passed down.**

The Jewish tradition understood this long before I caught on. It is no coincidence that on every major holiday we add the Yizkor service to remember loved ones who have passed away. We do so both to recall what they meant to us when they were alive but also to make them more present at a time when our hearts are open to self-reflection, gratitude, forgiveness and a desire to become more righteous people. Indeed memory is what keeps our loved ones alive and present, even years after they died. **Sometimes it takes the form of an empty seat.**

**Let me suggest three action items that can strengthen this memory muscle:** We can "create memories" that will make our families stronger forces in our lives, helping us to pass down legacies and enjoy deeper roots in an all-too transient world.

- 1-Encourage parents and grandparents to make video or audio recordings of their lives. Consider using the NPR StoryCorps format with you as the interviewer;
- 2- Create a routine of a family dinner, attendance mandatory, with no technology allowed. Do it at least once a week. Friday night is a good place to start. Candles, wine and fancy bread encouraged. If you want, you can call it "Shabbat"; and
- 3- Instead of a family vacation, consider taking your family on a service mission where you do hands-on work to help people in need. This December will be Adat Shalom's third service mission to Haiti and next summer Adat Shalom will be introducing a 5-day domestic service mission for families. Consider joining one of these. It will be life-changing for your family and a memory that will last a lifetime.

## Personal Identity

There is a section of the Rosh haShana musaf service that is called Zichronot, “rememberances”. It starts out as follows: “You (God) remember all the events that ever happened in the world and the deeds of all humans since the dawn of creation.” Gee whiz! And we are worried about the NSA!

Of course this is classic rabbinic theology that most of us do not accept literally—a belief in an all-knowing, omniscient God who knows our every thought and action. Yet non-Orthodox Judaism has often been too quick to dismiss a traditional Jewish idea just because it does not accord with our modern sensibilities. I prefer to ask the question: What is behind this teaching that may have value for us?

The answer to that question is accountability. Judaism teaches that nothing escapes God’s attention and the Rabbis believed that that realization made Jews more ethical, more moral and more observant people. Guess what? It works.

Let’s do a survey. How many of you have gotten a ticket this year based on a photo that a speed camera took of your car? Raise your hands. How many of you have been mindful of slowing down in the subsequent times you drove by that camera? Raise your hands. **I rest my case. Accountability works.**

**One of the great moral failings of American society is that we have allowed personal autonomy to trump personal accountability.** The people who make a difference in the world take accountability very seriously. Some feel accountable to God but others feel accountable to causes that seem Godly. You make certain life decisions if you feel accountable to making the world more ecologically sustainable; you make certain life decisions if you feel accountable to people in our community who don’t have a roof over their heads; you make certain life decisions if you feel accountable to people in our community who don’t have enough food to give their children three meals a day. **That is the kind of accountability that matters!**

In our *machzor* there is a list of sins that we recite several times during Yom Kippur. It is called the *viddui*, the confessional. For each line we beat our breast upon reciting the first words: “For the sin we have committed by...”. The list may not cite every sin but it is a pretty darn good start. It helps us remember what our psyche would prefer to forget. In the same way that an alcoholic can only start on the path to recovery if he or she admits that they are an alcoholic, we can only become better people if we are reminded of our sins. **The *viddui* is the speed camera for our souls.**

What does this have to do with personal identity? We engage in a ritual focused on sin, confession and repentance not to suggest that we are bad people. We do so because we understand that the human condition is such that we all screw up, we all make mistakes, we all say things that offend and hurt and wound others. Ironically, we tend to do it big time to those whom we love the most. To be a *mensch*, you have to remember the action, own it and then seek the forgiveness of the person you hurt.

This brings us to the talent that all of us are challenged to get right. In the realm of interpersonal relations, each of us is alternately on the apology side of the equation or on the forgiveness side of the equation. To get the apology piece right, you need to remember what you did. But to get the forgiveness piece right, you need to forgive and then forget what was done to you. Put it behind you. To hold onto the hurt and offense too long will inevitably poison your own soul and undermine your ability to maintain good relationships.

**For this personal identity dimension I offer only one action item to strengthen your memory muscle:** Don't wait for Rosh haShana to engage in Zichronot, memory work. Create a weekly, if not a daily routine of writing down things you are a grateful for. Someone does something nice for you, be sure to express your gratitude verbally and then record it to remember all the kindnesses that are extended in your direction. **You will be amazed at how much goodness there is in the world. We sure can use a healthy dose of that consciousness in these troubled times!**

In the same journal also write down the things for which you may need to make amends. You make a joke at someone else's expense; you cause hurt by excluding someone from a social get-together; you are short-tempered or impatient with a loved one. In each of these situations and others like them, find the time to say you are sorry and then pray that they passed the "forgive and forget" test.

The practice I am suggesting is not new. Long before Dale Carnegie, the rabbis who created the ethical literature of the Musar movement taught that a daily regimen in which people routinely express gratitude to others and ask forgiveness of others was the secret to winning friends, influencing people and maintaining healthy interpersonal relations. It is like installing a speed camera for your soul and it can change your life.

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I know. This was a lot to remember. Anticipating that, I created Cliff Notes for this sermon that you can take home with you. On the table in the foyer you will find a 1-pg. summary of all the action items I mentioned tonight and it will remain there throughout Yom Kippur. It is your homework for the New Year. I hope it will find a prominent place in your home that you look at often. Like a refrigerator. Not only will you look at it many times a day but people coming to your home may look at it and ask you about it. All the better. Maybe it is a way to have Jewish character improvement go viral without the internet.

Life seems to be coming at us faster and faster every year. As we instinctively react to world events, changes in the workplace, developments in our family, in our community, in our circle of friends, it is very easy to lose perspective on who we want to be. **Like a car that needs an occasional tune up, may these High Holydays provide an opportunity to remember the lessons of our people, the legacy of our respective families and a vision of our best selves. And with that may we make the year ahead one that is more meaningful, more joyful and more fulfilling.**

Shana tova.