

***Forgetting to Remember***  
**First Day of Rosh Hashanah 5772**  
**Rabbi Josh Berkenwald**  
**Congregation Sinai, San Jose, CA**

The Great Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote a short story called *Funes the Memorius*, about a young nineteen year old Uruguayan villager named Ireneo Funes, who suffers a paralyzing injury when he is thrown by a half-tamed horse. Along with his paralysis, Ireneo is left with an extraordinary ability. He remembers everything he experiences. Every single detail. This is how he is described:

With one quick look, you and I perceive three wine glasses on a table; Funes perceived every grape that had been pressed into the wine...He knew the forms of the clouds in the southern sky on the morning of April 30, 1882...

He was able to reconstruct every dream, every daydream he had ever had. Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day... but each reconstruction had itself taken an entire day.

Funes remembered not only every leaf of every tree in every patch of forest, but every time he had perceived or imagined that leaf.”

Funes is so overwhelmed with memory that he stays in the house, enclosed in a dark room, never leaving. 'I, myself, alone, have more memories than all mankind since the world began...' he explains. Funes goes on to say: "My memory, sir, is like a garbage heap." By the time Funes turns twenty one, he dies, incapable of living in a state of constant memory.

The great 19th century American psychologist William James taught that, for practical purposes, forgetting is just as important a function as remembering: "If we remembered everything," he writes, "we should on most occasions be as ill off as if we remembered nothing."<sup>1</sup> If we did not forget a prodigious number of details, we would not be able to remember at all.

What is memory?

Rabbi Karyn Kedar describes it as "the bringing together of pieces of the world in such a way that they tell a story. The linking of thoughts and pictures until they make sense. Memory is the narrative we tell the world and ourselves and that forms the present reality."<sup>2</sup>

Memory informs who we are. It tells us our place in the world. As Jews, we are commanded

- 
1. William James in *Text-book of Psychology*, Chapter XVIII – “Memory”, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1892), p. 300.
  2. *Rosh Hashanah Readings*, ed. by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, p. 202.

*zakhor*, remember, every day of our lives. We remember leaving Egypt, receiving the Torah on Mt. Sinai, being sent into the Diaspora after the destruction of the Temple, being expelled from Spain, being murdered in the Holocaust, celebrating the State of Israel - these are our collective Jewish memories that place us in the world. They explain our relationships with each other, with our ancestors, and with God.

But of course, we don't remember all of the details of the past three thousand years. Imagine each memory as a dot. We assemble a series of dots, which we then connect with lines. And those lines tell our story. Not mentioned are all of the other memories, the other dots, which lie outside of the line. The dots that have faded away.

To remember everything would be paralyzing. We would be lost in the world just as surely as if we remembered nothing. History is the science of selective remembering.

One of the names of Rosh Hashanah is *Yom Hazikaron* - The Day of Remembrance.

Memory has special significance on Rosh Hashanah. This time, however, it is not we who are the subjects of the verb *zakhor*. This time it is God whom we ask to remember. Our mahzor features the idea of Divine memory quite prominently.

The first example is from the prayer *Unetaneh Tokef*, which we recite during the repetition of the musaf amidah. The medieval poem has three scenes: a trial, the judgment, and the sentencing. God is described in the first scene as judge, prosecutor, expert, and witness. Then, God is compared to a shepherd, counting each living being like sheep passing beneath the staff. The third step is the sentence: "How many will pass on, and how many will be born, who will live and who will die..." and so on.

But if it is a trial, there has to be some evidence. God opens *sefer hazikhronot*, the Book of Remembrances, which only God can access. We say to God, *vatzikor kol-nishkachot*, "You remember all of the forgotten things." Then the book reads itself, for, as the poem declares, our own hands have signed its pages.

What is written in the book? All of our actions from the past year. Everything we have done. Every choice we have made. Every penny of tzedakah we have given. Every piece of gossip we have passed along. Every mitzvah. Every mistake.

None of it remains forgotten, even if we ourselves can no longer recall the details. *Unetaneh Tokef* is a terrifying prayer, reminding us that our actions are ours to make, but our destiny is out of our hands.

So that is one kind of memory. Noting all of the details. Leaving nothing out. Not terribly reassuring, is it? It is the same kind of memory as Ireneo Funes, although for a human, that kind

of memory is paralyzing. Only God, for whom there is no past or present, only an eternal now, can sort out the details.

But then, in the mahzor, we ask God to remember in a different way. Later on in the musaf amidah, we will come to three sections, each structured around a similar pattern. *Malkhuyot*, *Zikhronot*, and *Shofarot*. Kingship, Remembrances, and Rams horns. After a poetic introduction, each section quotes ten biblical verses on the theme, then a blessing, and a closing round of shofar blasts.

In the middle section, *Seder Zikhronot*, Remembrances, we appeal to Divine memory not for the sake of passing judgment, but for the sake of mercy. We want God to remember so that we will be saved.

The first verse is from the book of Genesis, after Noah has bobbed around on the ark with two of every kind of animal for one hundred fifty days of water swelling over the face of the earth. The Torah then says: "God *remembered* Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark and God caused a wind to blow across the earth and the waters subsided." (Gen. 8:1) It is as if God has completely forgotten about them while the earth is being destroyed, and then suddenly remembers. "Oh, wait. I was supposed to save some of my creatures. Hey! There they are, on that cute little boat. I better do something." It is a remembrance of taking notice.

The next verse is similar, from the book of Exodus. It refers to God finally hearing the enslaved Israelites groaning in Egypt, after hundreds of years of suffering and abandonment. "God heard their agonized cry, and God *remembered* the covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." (Ex. 2:24) This time, the reference is to a Covenant, a promise that God had already made to the Israelites' ancestors. God's memory evokes an obligation, and God's emotional connection to our ancestors' pain.

Perhaps the most touching of the verses is also found in the haftarah for the second day of Rosh Hashanah. "Is not Ephraim My dear son, My precious child, whom I *remember* fondly even when I speak against him? So my heart reaches out to him, and I always feel compassion for him, declares Adonai." (Jer. 31:20) Even while the Jewish people, personified by the child Ephraim, are unfaithful, God still recalls God's love for a precious child who is misbehaving. It's like a mother who knows she has to punish her child, but she can't because he's just too cute. And so she hugs him instead.

By including these verses in our mahzor, we reassure ourselves that God will remember us with kindness even at those moments when we do not think we deserve it.

We also are asking a God who seems distant and hidden to remember how God once loved us, and promised our ancestors to redeem us. We are trying to get God's attention. Notice me. Notice me.

It appears from these passages that God might not have perfect memory. God seems to forget things. And needs to be reminded. In fact, wants to be reminded.

In our mahzor, we have two very different models of Divine memory. One is terrifying, in which everything is revealed. Another is hopeful, remembering in mercy.

It should be clear which kind of memory is better for us. The truth is, we don't want God to remember everything. When we ask God to remember, we really mean "just the good stuff." The stuff that argues in our favor. And if God is going to remember the bad stuff also, we pray for God to remember to be merciful. Remember that we have been good. Remember our ancestors. Bring us back. Give us a second chance, or a third or a fourth chance.

What we are really asking for, and I don't think you will find this written anywhere in the machzor, is for God to do a bit of selective forgetting.

Last December, there was a program on *60 Minutes* about a recently discovered, extremely rare psychological condition called "Superior Autobiographical Memory." It featured five adults with this condition, including Marylu Henner, who as an actor played Elaine O'Connor Nardo on the 1970's sitcom *Taxi*. These five people had perfect memory. You can name a date going back decades, and each of them can tell you everything they did that day, what they ate, what happened in the world, the weather, and so on. It turns out, contrary to Ireneo Funes, they do not have to shut themselves up in a darkened room. They are able to function relatively normally.

It seems that the human mind may be capable, after all, of remembering much more than the vast majority of us are able to recall.

But then again, the report ended by noting that four of the five have never married and are not currently in relationships. Marylu Henner is the only one with children. She is in her third marriage. The possession of perfect recall would seem to make it difficult to stay in a relationship.

One of the interviewees explained that every time she remembers an experience, all of the emotions that she originally felt come flooding back as if it is the first time again. Just imagine what it would be like to have to relive a painful experience with full emotional intensity. She described it as being difficult, but also of giving her life a tremendous sense of meaning. Having not experienced total recall, most of us are quite grateful that our memories of pain soften over time. That, in fact, is what makes it possible for us to have relationships. That's what makes it

possible to forgive.

This is the time of year when we engage in the process of *cheshbon hanefesh*, or taking account of our souls. It is a time of praying to God, of asking for pardon. It is also a time of turning to one another. We acknowledge times when we have wronged each other. When we said insensitive things. When we were dishonest. When we did not support each other properly. And we ask for forgiveness.

And what we are really hoping is that the other person will accept our contrition, and move whatever offense we may have caused from his or her mind. We ask God to be merciful rather than judgmental. We ask for the same thing from each other. Merciful forgetting is the foundation of healing in a relationship.

Of course, I am speaking generally. There are times when it is impossible to forget the ways in which we have been wronged. But similar to what we ask of God on Rosh Hashanah, we ask each other to set those wrongs to the side. Don't judge me for how I have wronged you. Look to all of the wonderful things we have done together. Remember how you felt about me when our relationship was intact. Let's return to that feeling. Let the memory of the hurt I have caused you fade.

In a marriage, if a spouse refuses to forget every single one of his or her partner's mistakes, the relationship will become paralyzed. If parents never forget their kids' misbehaviors, it will result in permanent grounding. For that matter, parents make a lot of mistakes raising children. Thank God they forget most of them.

In addition to being *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance, Rosh Hashanah is also *Yom Harat Olam*, the world's birthday. Today, in the Jewish calendar, is the first day of 5772. Along with looking back at our own behavior over the past year, we also look to what has taken place in our world. It's been a hard year.

The economy still struggles, with millions of Americans out of work. Not to mention in other parts of the world. Strange and devastating weather patterns have disrupted lives. Israel faces pressures from every directions, including from countries which it used to count on for peaceful relations. American soldiers are still in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I have faith that things can get better. Just as in personal relationships, humanity has to be able to do a bit of forgetting if we are going to move on. Yes, we have to remember how we got here, if only so we will not be doomed to repeat our mistakes. But we also have to let the pain, and violence, and ugly rhetoric, and all of that unpleasantness, fade.

This Rosh Hashanah, as we reflect on the year that has passed, and look forward to the year

that awaits us, may we be blessed with *zikaron*. May we learn from our experiences of pain, and from the mistakes we have made. May we also be blessed with the mercy of forgetting. Let those we have wronged accept our penitence. May the hurt we have caused fade, that we might grow in our relationships. May God, who remembers all of the forgotten things, remember us also with mercy, and bless us with a year of healing, of love, and of peace.