



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2024/5785

“The Mitzvah of Memory”
Based on a teaching by Rabbi Tali Adler
Yizkor Sermon, Yom Kippur, 5785/2024
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Today as we are about to enter our Yizkor Service, I would like to talk with you about memory. Yizkor means remembrance and these High Holy Days are described by our sages of old, as both a time of remembering and a time of judgment. Before we can plant seeds for the new year, we must look back and take stock.

Our Torah itself emphasizes the power and importance of memory. Throughout the entire book of Deuteronomy, after forty years of wilderness wanderings, Moses reminds the people of many of their past experiences. Some of these memories are exclusively dark. We are commanded never to allow someone from Ammon or Moav to join the Jewish people because they would not sell us food or water when we left Egypt. We are reminded of how the Moabite King hired Bilaam to curse us. We are commanded never to forget what Amalek did to us when they attacked us on our way out of Egypt.

Other memories however, are redemptive: we are commanded to remember that we were slaves in Egypt and that God freed us. That memory in particular, which includes both slavery AND freedom, is given as the reason we must always care for those who are vulnerable and unsupported, widows, orphans, and the poor.



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There is one memory, however, that seems impossible to classify as either dark or redemptive. In Deut. 23:8 we are commanded: ***lo titev mitzri, ki ger hayita b'artzo***. You may not hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land. In memory of the time we spent there as strangers, we are commanded never to hate the Egyptians, and to allow them, after several generations, to join the Jewish people.

Usually, recollections of Egypt in our tradition and in our liturgy bring to mind images of slavery and suffering. Rashi, in his comment on this verse, highlights this suffering in the starkest of terms. He comments, "You may not despise an Egyptian, even though they threw your babies into the Nile." Even though you endured terrible suffering there, even though it is the paradigm for persecution. "Why? Because you were a stranger in his land. Because," Rashi explains, "they hosted you in a time of dire need."

We should recall that earlier in our history, Egypt was a place of refuge and safety for Jacob and his family during a time of famine. And so despite the years of persecution we endured there, we are commanded to remember that initial hospitality. We are commanded to remember the good beginning of what became a terribly dark story and we are commanded to let that memory guide our treatment of Egyptians in the future.

We are commanded, in this mitzvah, to remember the past in all its complexity: not to forget the suffering that we endured, but at the same time, not to allow our memories to become exclusively dark. We are commanded to remember honestly. We are commanded to remember moments of beauty and kindness even as we remember suffering, persecution, and darkness.



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As I mentioned earlier, our High Holy Days are referred to in the Talmud both as Yom Hazikaron, the day of memory and Yom Hadin, the Day of Judgement. Our Rabbis provide two distinct images of remembering and judgment for these days. The first is an image of scales, where all the good things that we did this year are placed on one side of the scale and all the bad things we did are placed on the other. They are weighed against each other, and one side prevails: our year is characterized either as good or bad. The scales evoke an image of the absolute. The good overpowers the bad and erases it, or vice versa.

However, the other image related to memory that is connected to the High Holy Days conveys a different message. It is the image of the books. The Rabbis teach that everything we do is written in a book that God keeps under His throne. In this image, **everything** is recorded. While there might be more good things than bad things or, God forbid, more bad things than good, the book consists of both. In this image, neither the bad nor the good can be erased. They are both parts of our lives and experiences, both indelible parts of our year.

The image of the book, much like our complex history in Egypt demands that we avoid the temptation of the “scales”. What I mean by this is that, in recounting our experiences, in thinking about our relationships, we most often remember them as exclusively good or exclusively bad. We forget about moments of joy and kindness in friendships and relationships that ended badly. We forget, or try to forget, about the moments of hurt or anger that are part of even our happiest days. We tend to recast our relationships with heroes and villains.



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We forget that the people around us are complex. We forget that most of our days, no matter how joyous or sad, contain moments that uplift and moments that weigh us down. It's understandable. No one wants to remember the fight they had with their child after a beautiful birthday or the kind things a former friend once did before the friendship ended. Life's complexity, its mixture of joy and sadness, is challenging.

This is the challenge of the mitzvah of memory. We are challenged to honor our experiences in all their complexity. It is the challenge of acknowledging that evil and suffering are real, while at the same time not allowing them to overshadow the realities of beauty and kindness.

This year, may we have the courage to face the complexities of our lives and our history. This year, may we live up to the challenge of memory.