

D'VAR TORAH

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Shabbat Shalom.

Today is my 60th birthday, and it's an especially emotional birthday for me because of a confluence of a number of events, consisting of both joy and sorrow.

I'm very glad that this birthday is falling on Shabbat, and I can celebrate it here with my TBZ Community.

But when I realized that March 15th this year was also Purim tonight, I had quite a jolt, because my Dad died, many years ago, early on a Shabbat morning that also happened to coincide with Purim that year, and, he was 59 years old when he died, just a few months short of having the opportunity himself to turn 60.

So, I am very mindful of being granted the good fortune to reach this day. And I feel a sense of opportunity and mission, going forward, as Moshe sometimes suggests and encourages after someone loses a loved one, that we can try to live larger, both for oneself and for the other(s) who are no longer here. And so, that's part of the reason I asked to speak today, to contribute, to live a little bit larger, and to mark this special time.

And again, that being said, I am grateful for being present, right here and now, grateful for this place, you, this beautiful loving and beloved Community, the Here and Now.

This Now, today, is Shabbat Zachor, literally "Shabbat Remember". We're commanded, or perhaps in a therapist's re-frame, we're invited, to recall and review a very painful episode from our collective history, about Amalek.

In fact, the reading tells us first to Remember, and states specifically what we are to remember, that Amalek, on our way out of Egypt, when we were tired and exhausted, cut off those of us who were lagging in the rear, and Amalek did not fear Gd.

Then the reading tells us that When Gd gives us peace from all the enemies around us, in the land that Gd gives us to occupy as a heritage, we must Obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the Heavens.

And then the reading tells us Do Not forget.

In short: remember, wipe out the memory, do not forget. It can be puzzling to try to harmonize these three instructions.

So, I've been thinking about this for a while. And then, a few weeks ago, I heard Andrew Solomon, the author of Far From the Tree, tell a story on "The Moth Radio Hour", about an interview he'd done with a very wise, soulful and, in my opinion, holy woman who'd survived the Cambodian Pol Pot's Killing Fields. She had herself suffered horrible trauma, including

witnessing the deaths of 2 of her own children, but while in a refugee camp after the horrific events, she noticed many many other women who had a blankness about them, rarely moved from out of their beds, seemingly not able to care for their own children who were there with them in the Camp, just staring blankly into space much of the time. She took it upon herself to try to help them and her approach had a three-part sequence.

First, she got them talking about what they'd gone through, to her, and eventually with each other. Although it might have been counter-intuitive to dwell on the horrors, she somehow knew they needed to go over it, agonizing though it was, for both the speaker and the listener. Then, bit by bit, she coaxed them to do simple jobs: to clean, sweep, make the beds, wash the floors, over and over, repeatedly doing, doing, doing. And, finally, she taught them how to give themselves manicures and pedicures, and then had them practice on each other.

She explained to Solomon that this was her cure for depression. First, get the story told, organized for oneself and out to someone else. Then fill the mind very full with something current, involving learning, and doing, so that there isn't room available in the mind to just fixate on the pain. And then, finally, implement tender care of self and other, promoting contact and connection, creating beauty for oneself and for others.

What wisdom! We know now, through neuropsychological research, that certain areas of our brains become very agitated and triggered as a result of Trauma, and that the combination, literally, of talking the talk and walking the walk, are the ways to calm down and heal those hot areas. That is, telling your story, talking about something, helps to assimilate it into your whole brain and not wall it off into some distinct exiled part of your brain where it festers, and remains. Also, physical activity, especially repetitive movement, quiets the fire down (in fact, that's probably why pacing back and forth, or any kind of repetitive fidgeting, like foot tapping, can be a natural behavior when we're feeling anxious....yes, exercise is a good thing!). And, finally, doing positive creative actions, for ourselves and for others, mitzvot, doing "good", rebuilds our own positive feelings about ourselves and contributes to repairing our world. I'm thinking about that word "repair" literally, to "re-pair", as to re-join from solitude and isolation, to connection with others, with Gd, as part of a Whole, joining the One.

Applying this sequence to what we read today on Shabbat Zachor, we need to Remember and are told the story, the precise content of what to remember, what to tell, what to share so that it does not stay walled off and unspeakable.

I think this is also a part of the gift we have in Jewish Ritual when we sit shiva and we have the opportunity to tell our story, about our beloved whom we've just lost, again and again to others. That is, Remembering, at first, enables us, in a healthy way, to assimilate a new post-trauma reality. Then, when time passes and Gd grants us peace and a place to be in this world that is for us, we must not wallow in the memory. When we read in Parshat Zachor to Obliterate the memory, perhaps it is instructing us to smash the hold of that memory on us, by doing, participating in life, taking action, and filling the space so as to crowd out the hold of the

traumatizing memory on us. And finally, we read, Do not forget and become complacent, but rather be informed, bigger and hopefully able to create something better, on account of the wisdom of history. If we were to be told to "fuhgetaboutit", no big deal, forgive and forget, it wouldn't be doable. Trauma, for an individual or a People, is not casual, not something to forget about. But neither is it something to preserve as is. It is forever a PART of who we are, assimilated and included into our whole self. And all of our parts hold wisdom and experience, and help us survive, grow, and live in a fuller harmonized way.

It occurred to me that this 3 step instruction can actually be understood as akin to the process of composting: identify the garbage, sift through and sort it out for yourself, carry it outside, then be active and turn it, then leave it alone most of the time, but don't forget about it. And when you do return to it, with time, it has become something rich and fertile that allows you to go forward stronger and fortified. If not well managed, that same garbage would have become smelly and infested piles, surrounding us, holding us back and possibly making us ill. But by being active, pro-active and not passive with it, something quite amazing happens. We join with forces larger than us, and the garbage becomes something fertile and capable again of producing and creating.

Finally, I don't mean to make it sound simple....each step, especially the first two, are excruciating and slow. But Shabbat Zachor reminds us that garbage happens, nations in many, if not every generation, will hurt each other. The Torah does not shrink back from the painful and real parts of our Natures. But, although we regularly read and remind ourselves of that pain, the final imperative of Parshat Zachor, the Parshah that teaches us about the subject of Remembering, is that, as a People, the goal is Do not forget, which is so much better than being stuck in just remembering.

Shabbat Shalom.