

Parasha Va'Eira - Why memory? Why not memory?

In this Torah portion, God tells Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh to demand freedom for the Israelites from slavery. Pharaoh refuses to free them. God unleashes plagues on the Egyptians. Pharaoh promises to free the Israelites and asks Moses to stop each plague, but each time, God hardens Pharaoh's heart.

I want to focus on one sentence in this powerful parasha. It appears in the first paragraph – Chap. VI, verse 5. God says, “And moreover I have heard the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage; *and I have remembered my covenant.*” (REPEAT THE LAST 6 WORDS).

Our holy Bible is filled with moments in which God seems preoccupied with the importance of memory. We're told to remember Shabbat, God demands that we remember what Amalek did to our ancestors, that we remember how our ancestors lived in booths – sukkot – while wandering in the wilderness, and so on. And that's what I want to discuss with you – the enormous emphasis our tradition places on memory. In a little while, I'll ask your thoughts on these two questions:

1. How does our focus on memory help us -as a people and in our own personal lives. And
2. Are there any downsides to our emphasis on memory?

First, a few reminders about the role of memory in our tradition.

- God's statement to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy (*Zakhor et Yom ha-Shabbat l'kad'sho*) is not only repeated several times in the Torah, it is one of the Ten Commandments.
- According to Maimonides, three of our 613 commandments relate to the Amalekites – the tribe that attempted to kill the Israelites after our exodus from Egypt. The commandments occur in Deuteronomy, Chapter 25, verses 17 and 19. “Remember what the Amalekites did to you when you left Egypt;” then, “Blot out the memory of Amalek;” and, “do not forget” the Amalekites’ atrocities.
- The holiday of Sukkot is largely about remembrance. We are instructed to live in primitive booths, as God commanded in Leviticus (23:42-5): “You shall live in booths [*sukkot*] seven days ... in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt...”
- Rosh HaShanah is called Yom haZikaron, the day of remembrance. One Jewish scholar says that this reinforces the role of memory in the process of introspection.
- On Tisha B’Av, the 9th of Av – we remember many of the catastrophic events in our past, including the destruction of both Temples.
- And think about the holiday that millions of Jews cherish – Pesach. It is an experience filled with memories and remembering – we follow God’s injunction to tell the story to our children, and to regard ourselves as though we too had left Egypt. Through various rituals, we remember our ancestors’ agony, Moses and Aaron’s demands for liberation, Pharaoh’s refusal to free the Israelites, God’s plagues, and our ancestors’ ultimate

liberation. Pesach not only reinforces our memories; through the rituals, songs and discussion it creates shared memories.

- The most frequent example of remembrance is God's repeated demand to welcome the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt. Sometimes the wording is, "Va'ahavtem et ha-ger." You shall love the stranger." What's striking about the instruction to welcome, or love, the stranger? Two things. First: God is reminding us to *remember* that we were strangers in Egypt. That's the reason we must welcome other strangers, because we've lived that life, and *we must remember how difficult it was to be the "other."* And second: God repeats the commandment to welcome or love the stranger, 36 times! That's more often than any other Biblical commandment. Now, for those of us who are well past our 50th birthday and find it difficult to remember where we left our keys (or our car in the parking lot), a little repetition is a good thing. But 36 times?!? Clearly, this requirement that we remember key moments in our past is tremendously important to God.
- And one last example: According to one expert, the Hebrew word for remember – Zachor – is in the Torah 169 times!

In a book *Zachor*, Yosef Yerushalmi argues that we are the only people who elevate the act of remembering to a religious imperative.

Why does our tradition place this enormous emphasis on memory?

Our sages and more recent authorities offer several thoughts. Here are three:

1. Professor Michael Bernard-Donals, director of the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Wisconsin, states that memory is foundational to Jewish concepts of justice. When we remember our past we recall being persecuted, enslaved, denied property, killed. Memory of such acts can produce empathy and, he argues, enhance our commitment to justice for all people. And we know that the Torah places great emphasis on justice.
2. Another view: God's emphasis on memory helps us create a sense of *collective memory*. As our son-in-law Rabbi Ari Hart points out, memory for Jews is far more than a cognitive act; it is a set of *experiences*. We don't just discuss our major holidays, we re-enact them. Consider: We light Chanukah lights each night and recall miracles that sustained us. We light Shabbat candles and sing the blessings; we're taught to engage in some actions and refrain from others on the seventh day. And, of course, Pesach is an extraordinary example of re-enacting the past: we eat matzo and bitter herbs to remember the bitterness of slavery, we recline as a sign of our freedom; our children sing the 4 questions, and the like.
3. Another way of understanding our preoccupation with memory has to do with *identity*. Being Jewish is about much more than religion. As we recall key moments through shared actions, as we create and re-create a collective memory, we develop a narrative that reminds us who we are as a people.

So, back to my original questions:

1. How does our continual focus on remembering our past help us as a people and in our own personal lives, and

2. Are there any downsides to our emphasis on memory?

I've already mentioned some of the positive aspects of our collective memory – the ways it reinforces our sense of identity, makes us more sensitive to the needs for justice, etc.

Here's one potential downside to our stress on memory. It's summed up very well by a line in a work by William Faulkner - *Requiem for a Nun*: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." That is, a preoccupation with memory can leave us *stuck* in the past, limiting our ability to move forward, to let go of old resentments or stereotypes, to capture new opportunities.

Please take a few minutes chat with people around you. What are your thoughts about our emphasis on memory in Judaism? How does it help? Are there risks or problems in its large role?

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Final thoughts:

I love the ways our traditions help us re-enact important moments in our past. I sometimes worry, though, that the ways we use memory can also limit our ability to forgive – forgive others, and perhaps forgive ourselves.

Consider this story from the book *Tuesdays with Morrie*, by Mitch Albom. (tell the story of Mitch's weekly visits with Morrie Schwartz as he was dying, and Morrie's one big regret – that he held on to his anger over his friend's failure to help when Morrie's wife was critically ill).

I want to emphasize that Morrie was a warm, kind, generous man. But at a key moment a good friend let him down, and he couldn't (or wouldn't) forget it. Nor was he open to forgiveness. And, after learning that his friend had died, Morrie couldn't forgive himself for holding on to the anger and memory of his friend's mistake.

If we're sometimes stuck in our own memories, our own narratives as individuals, just think of the far larger implications when nations and tribes cling to their ages-old memories. The Shias and Sunnis have been fighting for over 1400 years. It began as a political conflict over who would choose the successor to the prophet Muhammad. And the bloody consequences are being played out every day in the around the world. Look at other trouble spots on the globe – in the Balkans, No. Ireland, the Middle East – and we see similar tragedies when different groups seem more committed to remembering their painful past than they are to creating a different future.

So, at the start of this new year, here's a thought. Think of someone who has hurt you. It's a hurt you sometimes still feel. You're guarded around that person. Now, try forgiving the person... In your heart... You won't forget what caused the hurt, nor need you forget. But you'll let go of a burden. As a colleague puts it, "you'll no longer let the person rent so much space in your brain."

Memory gives us so much. But, like all gifts, it has its limits.

Shabbat shalom.