It’s hard to look at the pictures taken from our son’s bris. In fact, we don’t look at them. We were so happy and proud, family was in from out of town, celebrating the miracle of this new life, the first grandchild on both sides, and his entrance into the covenant of our people. But the pictures still hurt.

That day, after the delicious celebratory meal and lots of time spent with family, our son got sick. We didn’t exactly understand what was happening at first, we thought he was just wheezing a little and seemed off. It wasn’t until we took him to the emergency room and the doctors expressed shock and disbelief at his temperature of 88 degrees. They thought the thermometers were broken.

They told us he had all of the symptoms of sepsis, and after lots of tests and a crush of doctors and nurses to help our little one, would need to be transferred to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at the largest and top rated hospital in New Jersey. On the same day that we had entrusted him to the mohel to perform his brit milah placed on a ceremonial pillow, the doctors, nurses, and EMTs gently placed him inside a special infant transport incubator and rushed him off in an ambulance.

That night as Heather and I sobbed in our head to toe PPE, the incredible medical team saved his life. They worked tirelessly to stabilize his temperature, took so many samples of blood, pricked, prodded, and poked our son who was only 8 days old.

We spent the next 7 days in the NICU, as they treated his symptoms, took every test imaginable, and helped us regain confidence in our ability to take care of our son. When we finally took him home, he was given a relatively clean bill of health, and in the months since then, he’s been fine. Better than fine actually. It’s almost as if that nightmarish time never happened.

But we don’t look at those pictures, and we don’t sing the same songs we sang to him the day he got sick. The memory of them is too sharp to resurface.

Even so, I think about our time in the NICU almost every day.
But over the course of the past almost 12 months, there are parts I’ve forgotten. I remember the pain and the worry and the intense desire to do whatever I can to keep him safe. But I’ve forgotten all of the specific details of what tests he did on which days. I remember the helplessness, but I’m starting to forget the hopelessness.

This was by far the most painful time in my life, when it was happening I would have sworn every detail would be permanently seared into my memory, yet there are times when I’m not sure I remember enough of those days. Perhaps I’m starting to forget.

And I suppose, that’s by design.

There are things I want to remember, and there are things I want to forget.

There is a growing body of research which suggests that forgetting is a natural and healthy part of our brains, with its own special mechanisms and utility. Forgetting, in a healthy way, argue these researchers, is a crucial technique of the brain and part of a well-functioning and balanced mind.

According to Dr. Scott Small, director of the Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center at Columbia University and the author of the book “Forgetting: The Benefits of Not Remembering: “In light of this new and growing body of research, normal, everyday forgetting can no longer be thought of as a malfunction of our memory machinery; instead it should be considered a healthy and adaptive part of our brain’s normal functioning. Memory and forgetting work in unison. We depend on our memory to record, to learn and to recall, and we depend on forgetting to countervail, to sculpt and to squelch our memories. This balancing act is, as it turns out, vital for our cognitive functioning, creativity and mental health.”

Sometimes, we need to forget if we’re ever going to be able to move forward. The ability to forget is crucial to protect us from the dangers posed by bad or traumatic memories. Dr. Small explains that if we don’t forget the right things, “we can get stuck in total emotional recall, reviving our distress in perpetuity.”
Dr. Small argues that not only is a mechanism for forgetting healthy for individuals, but it can be for society as well. One day, when the most acute dangers of the covid 19 pandemic are long past, we will forget parts of the fear, the constriction, the isolation. We will let go of the parts of our pandemic experiences which are unhealthy to hold on to, while hopefully retaining the memory of the importance of this time, the lessons learned, the lives lost and memorialized.

These researchers also suggest that while the fading of certain memories is often part of healthy brain functioning, instead of viewing all memory diseases like dementia as attacking the systems of memory, some of them actually might negatively impact our systems for forgetting. This new way of thinking about and studying the benefits of a memory deleting system suggests new avenues and mechanisms for treatment in the long term. I hope and pray that this research will forge new paths for treatment, to protect and heal those we love from these debilitating conditions.

That the technology of memory includes functions for retaining and for losing information probably isn’t surprising. We are designed to forget pain just as we’re hardwired to remember jubilation. We forget wrongs done against us just as we remember kindnesses, or at least we should.

In the Torah, Rosh Hashanah is called Yom HaZikaron, the day of remembrance. One of the central themes of this day is that we fervently pray to God to remember us.

It’s an interesting phrase and idea. What does it mean for God to remember us? Surely we don’t think God needs a little sticky note with our name on it. As the creator of all humankind, what does god need to remember about us?

One answer is that remembering is simply an idiom for caring about us, for considering us, for taking note of us. We remember things that are important. We promise to circle back to them. We see this most prominently in the Torah reading for today, where it says God took note of Sarah. God made a promise and then remembered to follow up and fulfill that promise.

But another answer, which comes up again and again in the liturgy for the high holidays, is that we are asking God to remember our deeds, our actions, and behaviors from this past year.
And yet, we realize that if we ask God to remember us, there are most likely going to be things God remembers about this past year that we’d wish God would forget. Personally, when I’ve been thinking about the past year, sure I can remember a lot of highs and successes and times when I’ve really hit the nail on the head personally and professionally. When I’ve been right in the right place at exactly the right time, when I said exactly what needed to be said. When I held my tongue and smiled and nodded exactly at the right moment.

And, sadly, I can also remember plenty of times when I look back at my behavior and cringe. That time I lost my cool over something small, when I wasn’t as patient with friends and family members as they deserved, when I wasn’t as generous with tzedakah or my time as I’d like to be, or times when I was a little too focused on me and not on others.

I’d like to forget those times, but I’d really like God to forget a few of those moments. But as we say in the Unetaneh Tokef- “You recall all that is forgotten, and will open the book of remembrance, which speaks for itself, since our own hands have signed the page”

There are things I want to remember, there are things I want to forget.

There are things I want God to Remember, and things I’d prefer for God to forget.

In psalm 130 we ask- God- if You keep a full accounting of sins, who can stand, who can survive? We know that if God remembers everything, like really everything, including that, whatever that is for you, who could handle it? Inevitably there’s plenty of good, but perhaps there’s even more bad than we’d like to admit.

Each of us has so much we’re proud of this past year, and yet so many ways we missed the mark. So what do we do, on this great and terrible day bursting at the seams with memory. The good and the bad, the things worth enshrining in stone, and the things we wish could be consigned to the dustbins of our conscience?

Our tradition suggests that the best way forward is relatively simple: to ask God to exercise that skill that is a part of a well functioning brain, that is slowly happening with my memory of our time in the nicu.

We ask God to forget. Or at least, not exactly to remember everything.

So we ask God to remember the good, and forget the bad.
It’s a daring thing to ask, yet we’ve already asked it at least 10 times today so far, and there’s still a long way to go. But not that long, don’t worry.

*We said* In the book of life, blessing, peace and abundant sustenance, may we be remembered and inscribed before You; we and all Your people, the House of Yisrael for a good life and peace.

Remember us in this good book for **good**. Remember the **good**. only.

In Avinu Malkeinu *We ask God to remember us favorably*— Zochreinu b’zikaron tov l’fanecha, perhaps remembering all of the good we have done over the course of this year.

We actually go even further than that, in the final line of Avinu Malkeinu that we sing, *Avinu Malkein, have mercy on us, answer us because our deeds are insufficient. Deal with us charitably and lovingly and save us.*

The whole conceit of avinu malkeinu, and indeed man of our prayers, is asking for God, from a place of love and forgiveness, to remember the good, and forget the bad, even though we might not technically deserve it. Even though it's a big chutzpadik ask.

Perhaps the greatest ask for God’s selective memory comes from the special blessing of Zichronot during the Musaf Amidah.

Instead of reminding God of all the good we’ve done, we ask God to remember the good deeds of our ancestors while ignoring our wrongs. We pray: **“You have always remembered that which has been forgotten for there is no forgetting in your realm. So on this day, in your great mercy, remember the binding of Isaac for the sake of his descendants. Baruch atah Hashem, who remembers the covenant. (Final chatima of zichronot).**

Forget our bad, remember our good, forget our inadequacies, and remember how great a lineage we come from. Remember the sacrifices of the generations that came before us, and forget our selfishness. That should make up the difference.

Just like we know that forgetting certain things is a crucial technique of a healthy brain, Judaism teaches that God’s forgetting certain things is part of a healthy functioning religion and relationship with God. This is core to the power of these awesome days of memory.

There are things we’d like you to remember God, there are things we’d like you to forget.
What Chutzpah.

But we Jews are known for our chutzpah on these matters.

*The Chasidic Master known as the Kedushat Levi was known for his daring prayers in defense of the Jewish people. Once he prayed, “Master of the universe, we have many sins. You have much forgiveness. I propose a deal: our sins for Your forgiveness. And should You say, that is not a fair deal, I would reply, Without our sins, of what use would your forgiveness be?”*

Somehow, miraculously, we believe that this is the only way for the system to really function.

If God really remembers all of the bad with the good, the balance might not work out in our favor. And what kind of world can exist without forgiveness at its core. What kind of people can exist, without forgiveness at their core.

As they say, to forgive is to forget.

And sometimes, to forget allows us to forgive.

There are things we deserve to remember, and there are things we need to forget.

The powerful forgetting of Rosh haShanah is best when it’s not just applied to God. It has massive potential for us as well.

To see her as a warm and loving mother to Isaac, Abraham needed to forget that Sarah demonstrated such coldness to Ishmael and Hagar. To remember that his father loved him, Isaac needed to forget that Abraham came this close to sacrificing him. To remember his duty and purpose, Abraham needed to forget that God almost asked him to sacrifice Isaac. To be remembered for life means to carefully forget some things, sometimes.

One of the most powerful and difficult to achieve mitzvot in the Torah is known as Shichecha, an agricultural mitzvah that can only be performed when you forget to harvest a row of corn or wheat. Shichecha means forgetting. Instead of going back to pick it for yourself you have to leave it for the poor and destitute and less fortunate. It’s a fascinating mitzvah because you can only forget by accident, and if you remember, you still have to pretend that you’ve forgotten that the produce belongs to you. Sometimes when we forget something, we open ourselves up to remember those less fortunate.
The midrash on the book of lamentation teaches that the rabbis who witnessed the destruction of the Second Temple had 5 interpretations for a given verse of Eikha, but the rabbis of the next generation had 50 interpretations. Why—shouldn’t those who saw it happen know it better? Of course. But the midrash teaches that the rabbis who witnessed the destruction broke out into tears every time they talked about it, so they could only learn so much. The next generation, which of course remembered the event instead of experiencing it forgot the acuteness of the pain, was able to learn without breaking into tears, and therefore they could teach even more. Certain forms of forgetting, even through the generations, can allow us to see and learn and teach even more. When we say never forget, we must mean never forget the events and their importance, but we don’t necessarily have to hold the stinging pain with us each day.

As I remember those terrifying and terrible days in the NICU, there is so much I want to remember, and so much I want to forget. I want to remember the unconditional support of family and friends, while I forget the beeps and boops of the machines. I want to remember the way the Jewish community supported us, from kosher meals to a free room in a walking distance apartment at the bikkur cholim., while i need to forget the scary conversations about muscle tone and oxygen levels. I want to remember my gratitude for the fields of science and medicine, for skilled practitioners and experts, for expertise and knowledge, while I want to forget potential diagnoses of what could have been. I want to remember that health and life are so precarious, such a gift, and forget that there was ever a time I questioned whether our son would make it through the night. Dear God, master of memories, on this day full of remembrances, help me remember, and help me forget.

Without question, all of us have plenty from the past year we need to remember, and plenty we deserve to forget.

To forget our grudges. To let go of the pain of certain memories so we can continue moving. To forget our blinders to let us see more potential and others around us. To forget what was bad so we can focus on what is good. To forget some hurts so we can experience many more joys. To forget anger so we can feel more love. To forget so we can forgive. To forget so we can remember what matters most. To forget so that we can remember life.
Dear God, who remembers us for life, as we implore you to remember the good and forget the bad, please help us to do the same. Give us the strength to write the chapters of our book of life without grudges or hurts, to soften and dampen the pain of certain memories. Help us to forget the pitfalls of the year that has passed and unlearn the behaviors that held us back. Help us to remember the potential of the year to come, and grant us a year full of good, of nothing but good memories.

Shana Tova

https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/09/opinion/pandemic-memory.html?fbclid=IwAR0n3mUcu1NCOHoNqBTamlvXPoOf2uz4x0bd-qIVRkOGfAHZZBnWITOkoMs