

The Bitter and the Sweet

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Kol Nidre 5778

September 29, 2017

Earlier this year Glenn and I took our boys down to Laguna Beach so that we could visit my family. I took my sons around to many of the places where I spent time when I was growing up. I showed them my childhood home, my old schools, the field where my brother played Little League, the alleys where I learned how to ride a bike, the bench where I would sit with my grandparents to watch the sun setting over the ocean.

As I walked around the town I felt like I was walking through a sort of saturated memory, like I was Dorothy plopped down in the middle of Oz. I could feel my emotions washing over me, everything was intensified. Time felt fluid, the past and the present merging together almost to where it felt like I could not tell the difference between then and now.

But not all of the memories were good. I remembered the loneliness of my childhood, the intense awkwardness and embarrassment of adolescence, the arguments I had with my grandparents, and the sense of otherness that would often come at the most unexpected times.

Memory can be both a blessing and a curse. But what I've come to understand, is that what really matters about our memories is the meaning that we ascribe to them.

This feeling of walking inside a memory was similar to when I walked through the streets of the Old City of Jerusalem for the first time. I remember being shocked at how it was both new and oddly familiar! It felt as though I was walking through a memory that had been buried deep in my soul, just waiting for me to remember it.

Walking through the ancient streets of Jerusalem was a lot like walking through my old hometown. It felt like no matter how far I might travel, where I might settle, I knew, that *that* place was where I would always be from, that part of me would always be there. I knew then that no matter how much time had elapsed, our collective Jewish past would always be a part of my present reality.

Time in the Jewish tradition, has not historically been understood as linear. In the Jewish calendar, time exists in a different dimension than our daily lives. The ancient Rabbis would say "*ein mukdam u'muchar ba-Torah*" there is no beginning, and there is no end in the Torah. In other words, important events in time do not happen once, rather these events are always happening, just waiting for us to step in and become part of that reality.

Let me try to put this in a different way. Through our prayers and our rituals we can enter a portal through time so that when we say the Friday night kiddish we are simultaneously here and in the Garden of Eden at the very first Shabbat.

When we celebrate a *seder* at Passover we are both here with our friends and loved ones and living the Exodus story as it unfolds throughout the night.

When we hear the 10 commandments chanted out of the Torah on Shavuot we are standing at Sinai hearing the words not from the person chanting from the scroll, but *al pi Adonai*, out of the mouth of God.

When we celebrate our holidays or read from the weekly Torah portion, we are not merely *remembering* what happened to our ancestors, we are *experiencing* them as though they are happening to us in that moment.

Lizkor - to remember - in Judaism is not merely to recall or remember the past, but it is to be immersed in that memory and in that moment. And when we do that, our memories become more than a recollection of the past, they become rich with meaning and purpose, they help us understand our *present* realities and inform our life choices. Our people's memories *become* our personal experiences.

To be Jewish is not simply to be the keepers of our own life's memories, but to be part of a collective consciousness that dates back to Creation itself. As Jews we are taught to understand that not only do we carry the memories of the generations that went before us, but we must also be mindful that our present day will someday be another generation's past, and therefore we should act with a sense of responsibility towards *them* as well as towards ourselves.

To be Jewish is to understand that communal memories are not only holy, but *personal*. And to be the keepers of those memories carries with it a sacred responsibility, not only to preserve them, but to allow them to become a part of our consciousness, and part of our important decision making.

But why would our faith ask us to experience memory in such a way? Isn't it enough to simply recall the past? Why must we *experience* it? Why each year at Passover must we say, "MY father was a wandering Aramean"? Why must we eat the matzah our ancestors ate? Why in a few weeks are we supposed to dwell in a sukkah instead of the comfort of our homes? Why does the Torah repeat over and over and over again to remember that we were slaves in Egypt?

Why do so many of our holidays ask us to remember the stories of when someone tried to kill us or oppress us? Why must we constantly dwell on such an unpleasant past?

As I walked through the streets of my childhood home I relived all the blessings and the curses of my time there. And I was surprised to realize that I was finally able to embrace all of the memories, the good and the bad.

As I walked, I realized that I would not choose to forget either. All the good *and* all of the bad things that occurred in my childhood have helped make me who I am, and who I still strive still to become.

My memories inform the choices I make every day, as a parent, as a wife, as a rabbi, as a Jew and as a human being. The blessings and curses of our past are forever intertwined in my story, my family's story, and the story of our people.

But it is not just our memories that matter. It is what we do with those memories. How do they affect the choices we make? How do they affect the way we see the world and each other?

What we do now - right now - has the utmost importance on the generations that come after us. Just as we are shaped by our people's past, future generations will be directly affected by what we do, or don't do, now.

Each of us has our own piece of the Jewish story. Each of our lives have been, and continue to be, affected by the choices made by our parents, grandparents and even ancestors who lived hundreds of years ago. Each of our families bear the scars of bigotry and anti-Semitism.

We sit in this beautiful sanctuary because of choices made by others, men and women who got on boats or planes to flee from oppressive regimes or to run towards opportunity. Men and women who had to make decisions to flee or to fight, to speak up against tyranny or to hide from Cossacks, or Nazis or religious fanatics. We sit here because others made sacrifices so that we could have a better life, an easier life, than they had.

We sit in this beautiful sanctuary with a police car outside, and fences around our property, security cameras that are on 24 hours a day, parent patrols during religious school, and we hold regular meetings about security and safety, because of choices *others* have made and continue to make about us.

And the most disturbing thing about this, is that we have come to accept this as normal.

We are standing at a crossroads in history where we too must now decide do we remain silent in the face of injustice, racism and a rise in the fascist inclination, or do we speak up? What will we do with the memories that have been entrusted to us?

Will we be like our Biblical ancestors, Abraham, Moses and Aaron and have the courage to speak truth to power?

Or will we be like Noah and remain silent about the fate of others?

Will we be disciples of the early rabbi Hillel who taught that the greatest principal of Torah is "what is hateful to you, do not do unto others"?

Or will we be disciples of his rival, Shammai, who was distrustful and disdainful of the stranger?

Will we be inspired by Dona Gracia Nasi, the 16th century Jewish Conversa and refugee from the Inquisition who risked her own life by using her money and influence to help rescue her fellow Jews?

Or will we identify with Pablo Christiani, a Jew who converted to Catholicism and then enthusiastically participated in the Inquisition and went on to convince King Louis IX of France to require Jews to wear badges that would single us out as Jews?

Will we be given the courage to act like Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Cheney who's lives were brutally taken from them on June 21, 1964 in Mississippi, because they were willing to fight for Civil Rights and an America that lives up to its highest ideals for *all* who live here?

Or will we cover up the story of Roy Cohn, a prominent Jewish attorney who served as Joseph McCarthy's chief counsel during Congress's communist witch hunt in the 1950's, where he helped persecute the innocent and gave cover to anti-Semites under the guise of patriotism?

These stories, the good and the bad, are all ours. Every story, the ones we love and the ones that we wish we did not know, are *all* part of the story of our people.

As King Solomon said in Ecclesiastes, "there is nothing new under the heavens. (Kohelet 1:9)" The dilemmas our ancestors faced come up again and again in each generation. And in each generation, choices need to be made.

The Yom Kippur liturgy asks us if will we choose life or choose death? Action or inaction? Silence or Righteous Outrage? Blessing or Curse?

It is not only important that we remember our stories, it is *imperative* that we learn from them.

In every generation we must ask ourselves again, what memories are *we* creating for those who come after us? How will *we* be remembered by future generations? What will we do that either brings a flush of shame to their cheeks, or a glow of pride?

In recording the Torah, Moses understood that to live a life filled only with blessings, without a recollection of our struggles puts us at risk of becoming insensitive to the pain and needs of others. And similarly, to live a life filled only with curses and tragedy can make us numb, and cold, and cut off from those around us.

The goal is to live in a state of balance. When we can find meaning in our pain, we learn that we lose nothing when we share our blessings with others.

And when we can count our blessings, even in difficult times, we remember the need to nurture hope not only for ourselves but for others as well.

The history of the Jewish people is filled with blessings and with curses, tragedy and triumph. Our task is to find meaning and purpose in *all* of it.

The great historian, Rabbi Arther Hertzberg summarized how he understood the existence of the Jewish people. He wrote:

"There is no quiet life for Jews anywhere, at least not for long. The only question is whether one lives among the tempests with purpose and dignity. We Jews know why we suffer. Society resents anyone who challenges its fundamental beliefs, behavior, and prejudices. The ruling class does not like to be told that morality overrules power. The claim to chosenness guarantees that Jews will live unquiet lives. I say it is far better to be

the chosen people, the goad and the irritant to much of humanity, than to live timidly and fearfully. Jews exist to be bold. We cannot hide from the task of making the world more just and decent. In a society without law, where brute power prevails, no one is safe, and most often the Jew is the least safe of all. Jews, therefore, must stand up for a society that is bound by human morality—and speak truth to power.¹”

To be part of the Jewish people is to be a part of something that is greater than ourselves as individuals. It defies the boundaries of time, it connects us with a sense of eternity, it is to understand that our present is interwoven with our ancestors past, and our children’s future.

This is something that became crystal clear to me as I walked my children through my childhood memories. As I walked through those streets no longer a child, but now a mother myself, I could see how those childhood tribulations and triumphs were now reflected in *their* lives, and I can only pray that they make better choices than I do.

On this holy night, through the prayers we utter, through the choices we will make in the coming year, we are given the gift of choosing to link our lives to all of the generations that have ever been and will ever be. We are given the opportunity to remember and to acknowledge that we do not go through this world by ourselves, but *with* each other, and for the *sake* of each other.

Eloheinu v'Elohei avoteinu v'imoteinu - Our God, and God of the generations before us, may a memory of us ascend and come before You. May it be heard and seen by You, winning Your favor and reaching Your awareness — together with the memory of our ancestors, the memory of Your people, the family of Israel. May we be remembered — for safety, well-being, and favor, for love and compassion, for life, and for peace — on this Day of Atonement.

And let us say: Amen.

¹ P. 231, Mishkan HaNefesh: Yom Kippur