

## Memories Can Change Us for the Better

Yom Kippur 5778

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The question was posed to me for today's Ask the Rabbi session, and it's been considered in numerous other forums, at times generating controversy: With all of the upheaval after Charlottesville, and with other recent events dealing with civil unrest, race, and cultural issues, what is the Jewish viewpoint on what to do about Confederate statues, monuments, names of schools, etc.? Should they be left in museums or left where they are?

I want to consider that question this morning – not to make a political statement, and not to come to any definitive conclusions (the answer probably varies depending on time, place, and other circumstances) but to consider the larger question, which is actually a theme for this exact moment of Yom Kippur – Yizkor, the hour of memory. What is the purpose of history? What is memory? What is our obligation to remember?

As I've said before, history is different from memory. History is a litany of facts, a record of things that happened long ago. History is static. Memory, on the other hand, is an expression of what that past means to *me*. Judaism doesn't really do history; there is no Hebrew word for "history" (היסטוריה is not really Hebrew). Judaism does memory. In the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, God does not open the history book. God opens Sefer Hazichronot, the Book of Memories. Nothing can change what happened in the past. And what happened in the past cannot alter the future. But meaning does change. Memories change, and memories change the people who remember.

I had a teacher in rabbinical school, Rabbi Morris Shapiro, who had been educated by Yeshivat Chochmei Lublin in Poland. He sat in the Bet Midrash every day with a volume of Talmud open, and he would answer questions if we had any about our own studies. He once told me about an experience he had with a group of 7<sup>th</sup> graders in Hebrew School. One of the students started asking questions: "Rabbi, Shapiro, you have told us that you have been studying Talmud since you were a little boy. But now you are an old man." Rabbi Shapiro nodded and the boy continued: "So it must be that by this point you have studied the entire Talmud, probably several times." And Rabbi Shapiro nodded some more: It is true. "So if you've been through it all, and maybe even memorized it, why is it that you continue to study it today?"

Rabbi Shapiro looked at the boy. "It is true, he said, "that I have studied these texts many times. And the texts never change. But I continue to study them because the interpretations change. And I change. Every time I revisit these pages, I see them as a different person, and I continue to learn."

The question of what to do with relics from the past that may no longer speak to us is nothing new, particularly for Conservative Jews. Our service today includes the Avodah, which recalls the Yom Kippur ritual in the ancient Temple – the goat sent to the wilderness, the goat slaughtered, the blood sprinkled. The Jews of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a lot of questions: What do you do with that stuff? We aren't

making plans to rebuild the Temple any time soon, so should we just forget about it? Do we say that we've evolved beyond that stage, and simply throw out what came before? That was the approach of the Reformers. But it's our heritage.

The Orthodox approach was to recite it anyway, sometimes even mindlessly ignoring the fact that the world has changed – and we have changed – in the 2000 years since the Temple was destroyed. That is not an option either.

The approach of Conservative Judaism has been to keep the texts, to preserve our heritage, but to question it, to interpret and reinterpret it, in order to find meaning in those memories. The same is true for the Martyrology service that follows the Avodah, which recalls the ten ancient rabbis who were killed by the Romans for the sin of studying Torah. We interpret this liturgy by updating the stories so that we don't only recall the victims of the Hadrianic persecutions, but also the martyrs of the Crusades, the victims of the Holocaust, and the heroes who died defending the State of Israel.

It isn't history, but meaning, recalling poignant moments in an effort to change us, the ones who remember. History doesn't change, but its meaning changes. We change.

For Ismar Schorsch, the previous Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, this point is the most important feature of modern Judaism. The title of his series of essays on Judaism of the last 200 years, is *From Text to Context*. We are the people of the book. Study is a sacred value. But our texts are not static. We must preserve our heritage, but also question it, express doubt, and, at times, make changes.

Rabbi Neil Gillman, another of my teachers, called his book on theology for the modern Jew *Sacred Fragments*. He got the title from an ancient Midrash, which says that the Aron HaKodesh, the holy ark that the Israelites carried with them in the wilderness, contained not only the second set of stone tablets that Moses received on Sinai, but also the broken pieces, the Sacred Fragments of the first tablets, which he smashed. The broken pieces were sacred too. And for Gillman, they became a metaphor for ancient ideas or rituals that appear broken or anathema in the modern world. There was no telling how they might become useful, no telling what – if anything – we might learn from these discarded relics.

Perhaps they were placed in the ark to remind our ancestors of what could happen if they failed to uphold the covenant. Maybe it was for another reason that we have yet to discover. But it would be arrogant to abandon them entirely or to imagine that we moderns have figured out once and for all what is right and just. Monuments, are just stones; by themselves, they are meaningless. Their value or lack of value is determined by the meaning we attribute them.

It sounds very Talmudic, and reminds me of a story of a certain non-Jew who approached a rabbi and asked if he could study the Talmud. And the rabbi pushed him away: "You can't handle it. There's no way that a novice such as yourself could possibly engage in the give-and-take, the depths of Talmudic debate." But the man was persistent: "No, no, no," he said. "Try me. I can do this." He was relentless, and so the rabbi said, "Okay. You think you can do this? Let's try. Two men go down the same chimney, and only one of them gets dirty. Which one cleans himself off?" "That's easy," the would-be

student replied. "The dirty one cleans himself off."

"No!" the rabbi exclaimed. "I told you it was hard. "The dirty one looks at his clean friend and assumes he is clean, and so he does nothing. The clean one, however, looks at his dirty friend, thinks he is filthy, and rushes to clean himself off." "Okay, okay," says the eager student-to-be. "Try me again." "Okay. You want another one? Two men go down the same chimney, and only one of them gets dirty. Which one cleans himself off?" "You just said it! The clean one cleans himself off!"

"Wrong again!" the rabbi exclaimed. "The dirty rubs his face and realizes he's filthy, and so he cleans himself off. The clean one does the same thing and realizes he is fine." "Wow, this is hard!" but the student persisted. "Please, please, try one more time." "Okay," said the rabbi. "Here's another: Two men go down the same chimney and only one of them gets dirty. Which one cleans himself off?"

"Well, that depends," the student begins to intone. "If the dirty person looks at himself and realizes that he's dirty, he will clean himself. But if they are just standing there and looking at each other, the clean one might see the dirty one and think he is dirty, and so he would be the one to clean himself off." "Wrong again!" the triumphant rabbi declared. "How could it be that two people would go down the same chimney, but only one of them would come out dirty?!?"

Beware of simple answers to complicated questions. The issue with the Confederate memorials is not whether they should stay or go, but what they should mean. What does the Civil War mean to this country today? What does race mean? What parts of history do I choose to remember, and how might those memories change me? The problem is not the monuments, but rather the people who use the monuments as an excuse to justify hatred.

When I was growing up in Atlanta, we used to visit Stone Mountain Park quite often, with family, youth groups, and on school trips. The face of the mountain features the largest high-relief sculpture in the world, which is a depiction of President of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis, together with Generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson on horseback. There is a museum of the Confederacy as well, and the grounds have, on occasion, been used by racist groups to stage bigoted rallies and demonstrations. So what do you do with that? It's an open question, but the people who are responsible for the site have been working to direct memories, to make sure that they are used in a positive way.

Every night in the summer, Stone Mountain puts on a laser show, which attracts many people. And there is one scene when the lasers actually bring the Confederate figures on the mountain to life. The lasers outline the horses and the horses start marching. There is a short battle reenactment. But then the music changes and General Lee takes his sword and breaks it into two. There is an image of the divided states reuniting to the sounds of patriotic music.

Memory is selective, and the question is what are we remembering, and to what end? Does one remember Robert E Lee, the slaveholder, the insurrectionist, the traitor ... or the general who surrendered at Appomattox, who worried that skirmishes and battles might continue after the war ended and carefully negotiated a settlement that would return defeated soldiers to their families and enable reconstruction to begin? Are these monuments and memorials designed to legitimize the "lost

cause” of slavery, to justify segregation, racism, and bigotry? Or can they be used to jump-start a conversation on race and culture and unity, which this country so badly needs? That’s the question that should govern what stays and what goes.

Memory is selective. And the challenge of what we remember and how we remember applies beyond the issue of these Confederate monuments. I have sat with families before funerals when they were unclear about how to eulogize their loved ones. How do you remember a parent who wasn’t always good? We cannot erase feelings of abandonment or adversity, but, to a certain extent, we can be selective.

The Talmud divides the world into three categories. *Tzaddikim Gemurim* are those who are completely righteous. *Resha’im Gemurim* are the completely wicked. And, by far, the largest category, is the Beinonim, the Intermediate ones. There are some people who are wicked – abusers who have done things that cannot be forgiven. But in most cases, we can look back over the years and remember the good things, the shared experiences, without giving undue emphasis to times of illness, alienation, or suffering. What we choose to remember, and the way in which we remember, actually changes us, and even changes the memories themselves.

In his best-selling book, *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering*, 2009 USA Memory Champion Joshua Foer writes that “Somehow, as memories change, their complexion changes. Each time we think about a memory ... we also transform the memory, and reshape it – sometimes to the point that our memories of events bear only a passing resemblance to what actually happened.”

Neuroscientists describe how memories actually change their molecular structure over time. As Rabbi Shoshana Boyd Gelfand puts it, “memories exist in relationship.” Yizkor “provides us our own private *ongoing* relationship with a loved one. It encourages an evolution of that relationship as opposed to allowing it to be frozen in time. Remembering someone over and over again enhances the parts of that relationship that prove sustaining, but allows us to forget those characteristics that are not.”

It is an active process. We generally think about memory as a retreat to the past, but its purpose is actually to look forward. Last week in the synagogue we read Ha’azinu, Moses’s final poem to the Israelites as they were about to enter the Promised Land. His opening words emphasize the importance of history: “*Zekhor y’mot olam*, Remember the days of old, *olam*, Consider the years of ages past. Ask your father; he will inform you, your elders, and they will tell you.” In context, Moses is reminding the people of their slavery in Egypt, how they were redeemed, the miracles they experienced. But the Rabbis read those lines differently. They don’t read OLAM, “Remember the days of old,” but rather “Remember the days of *olam* ... *haba*, remember the days of the future.” When you might be suffering, think about how much good may yet come. Memories affect the future.

The word Yizkor literally means “May He remember.” In the Yizkor prayer, we call upon God to remember, and we pledge to remember as well because memory leads to action. In the Bible, God’s memory is always linked to actions:

- ויזכר אלהים את נח, God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and God caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided.
- ויזכר אלהים את רחל, God remembered Rachel; God heard her prayer and opened her womb.
- ויזכר אלהים את בריתו, God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites and God took notice of them.

And so it is with us. Repeatedly we are commanded to remember that our ancestors were slaves in Egypt, and that memory becomes the basis for other responsibilities. Do not mistreat the stranger. Do not harden your heart against your kinsman. You shall protect the widow and the orphan. You must provide gifts as you set your servant free. “וזכרת, And you shall remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I enjoin these commandments upon you this day.”

To quote Joshua Foer again, “For Jews, remembering is not merely a cognitive process, but one that is necessarily active. Other people remember by thinking. Jews remember by doing.” The *mitzvah* of remembering goes hand in hand with the *mitzvah* to give *tzedakah* and perform acts of charity. What we remember – the good, the bad, the in-between – that matters less than what we pledge to do, how we make loved ones’ lives meaningful through our actions. To quote Rabbi Leo Jung, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox leader, Yizkor is “not a prayer for the dead, but a pledge from the living.”

In some communities, *Yizkor* is referred to as *Seder Matnat Yad*, the Service of Giving Generously for the sake of those who have died. By performing acts of justice, love, and care, we honor the deceased and ensure that their influences will be for good. “יזכר אלהים, May God remember. הנונו, even as we pledge *tzedakah* to perpetuate the memories of their souls.”

In this new year, as we remember loved ones, as we remember victims of the Holocaust and other martyrs of our people, and as we contemplate what those memories mean, I pray that we might be changed for the better. Renew our commitment, O God, to our sacred heritage and tradition as we commit to carrying on the positive values of those who came before us. Give us the courage to fight bigotry and hatred as we pursue a society that is guided by love. Let us rise above the darkest moments of history, that our memories may guide us to create a world of equality and justice for all.

*Gemar Hatimah Tovah*, May we be inscribed for good in the Book of Life. Amen.