In a few minutes we will be reciting Yizkor prayers. The word “yizkor” means, “May He remember.” We will pause to remember our loved ones.

As I’m sure we all know, memory is very important to living a Jewish way of life. We are the people who are called upon to remember. “Zachor!” or “REMEMBER!” is our watchword.

First, we are taught to remember the mitzvot. Why, after all, do we put on a tallit? “L’ma’an tizkeru ... In order that [we] may remember to fulfill the mitzvot.” And certain mitzvot contain their own charge to remember. As it says in the Ten Commandments, “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.”

We could call this “essential” memory: the call to remember our values and our practices.

Second, we Jews are a people of history. So much of who we are is tied to memories of the past. We devote ourselves to reminding ourselves where we came from, where we’ve been and what we’ve done.

Repeatedly the Torah tells us, “Remember that you were slaves in the Land of Egypt.” And we aren’t only supposed to remember the Egyptians. Just a few weeks ago, we read in the Torah: “Zachor et asher asah l’cha Amalek”—“Remember what the Amalekites did.” And, of course, we remember the Romans and the Crusaders and the Nazis. As we say, “Never forget!”

This we might call “existential memory” – the charge to remember our past, and, in particular, how others treated us. Why? (a) To distinguish our behavior from that of our oppressors; and (b) to be on guard against future oppressors.
O.K. So we’ve made the case for the importance of memory. What then do we make of the following midrash, the following rabbinic legend?

“When the Almighty finished creating the world and was about to release it, God suddenly realized that God had forgotten an indispensable ingredient without which life could not endure. God had, as it were, forgotten to include shikh’chah— the ability to forget. So God called back the world and blessed it with shikh’chah. Then God was satisfied that the world was ready for human habitation.”

What’s the message? **Only a world with shikh’chah in it is habitable. Forgetting is what makes life possible.**

There is actually a mitzvah, a Jewish religious obligation, called shikh’cha, “forgetting,” whose fulfillment depends on your ability to forget.

The law teaches us that if you’re a farmer, and you’re harvesting your crop, … well, to explain this I have to say something about how harvesting used to be done. It used to be done the hard way: by going into the fields, and cutting off the grain from the ground, and binding a large cluster of grain into a sheaf; leaving it and going to the next area, doing the same thing; and then coming back and gathering the sheaves.

OK, so let’s say you’re a farmer and you’re doing this, and you forget one of the sheaves, or a few of the sheaves. And you’re back at the barn, or maybe you're on your way to the granary and you remember that you forgot to pick up that sheaf in the third row back there … Aha! That sheaf no longer belongs to you; it belongs to the economically distressed members of society who spend their days rummaging around for food: the poor, the dispossessed, the bereft.

Now that is a strange law, isn’t it? If we discovered that we had forgotten a sheaf, our natural instinct would be to feel bad about that, and to go back and claim it.

Maybe that’s why the rabbis told the following story. Once there was a pious person who, when he realized that he had forgotten a sheaf in his field, was

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1 “Remembering and Forgetting,” Sidney Greenberg, *Adding Life to Our Years*, pp. 119-126 (preached on Yom Kippur 1951); p. 120.
overjoyed. He told his son to arrange to bring a special offering of celebration to the Temple. It’s one thing, he told his son, to fulfill a commandment intentionally. That’s how you fulfill just about every mitzvah, from honoring parents to lighting Hanukkah candles. But not in this case: this mitzvah is not something we can plan for or we can do on purpose. In this case, said the man, I feel fortunate, for if I had *intended* to fulfill this mitzvah, I wouldn’t have fulfilled it at all! (Tosefta Pe’ah 3:8)

When it comes to gathering grain, forgetting is a good thing, because if we forget, the poor will benefit. In such a case, forgetting is not a flaw; it’s an opening that allows us to have a relationship with those around us who are less fortunate than we are; it allows us to be better people.

**There are things other than grain that maybe we should be forgetting once in a while.**

A number of women have commented to me that it’s only because we can forget the pain of childbirth that anyone has more than one child.

Certainly, it’s remarkable that we can forget physical pain.

That’s quite something.

Maybe even *harder* is forgetting emotional pain.

Sometimes, it seems we can’t ever let go of that.

There’s a great cartoon that ran in the *New Yorker* a few years ago.

A group of people are at a wake. They’re standing around the coffin looking at the face of the deceased. And one of them says, “I don’t want to remember her like this. I want to remember her for the mean thing she said to me in 1981!”
There’s a lot of truth to that, isn’t there? We all remember, don’t we, the family fights from years—even generations—ago, the dirty look that someone gave us, the way so-and-so insulted us, the way Uncle Max behaved at grandma’s seder fifty years ago? All those things are in our archives.

One of the hardest things to forget is an insult, right? Whether it’s intentional, that is, whether it’s a case where you know, you just know, that a person has gone out of his or her way to put you down; or inadvertent, as when someone thoughtlessly ignores you or slights you or fails to appreciate you.

Boy, are we good at remembering those things, right? It’s probably evolutionarily engrained in our DNA: after all, if we remember those who “dis” us, we may be able to avoid being taken advantage of by them in the future.

And yet, sometimes, we can take memory too far.

Remembering and forgetting play an important role in a passage that we’re going to read from the Torah this very afternoon. There are two mitzvot that we’ll be reading about that exist at the hinge between remembering and forgetting. They are the mitzvah not to take revenge, and the mitzvah not to bear a grudge.

They may sound like they’re the same, but in the Jewish tradition, they are understood to be two different mitzvot.

Rashi explains the difference: What is “taking revenge”? Simple: let’s say you ask your neighbor to lend you a rake, and he refuses. The next day, he comes over to you and asks to borrow your shovel. So what do you say? You say,
“NO! You didn’t lend me your rake yesterday, so I’m not going to lend you my shovel today.” That, in rabbinic language, is “taking vengeance.”

So what then is “bearing a grudge”?

Well, same facts—up to a point. You ask your neighbor for his rake, and he refuses. The next day, when he comes over to you and asks to borrow your shovel, you give it to him. After all, you’re not taking revenge. But when you’re handing it over to him, you say: “I’m going to lend you my shovel—even though you didn’t lend me your rake.” That is bearing a grudge.

Both of those responses are soundly condemned by our tradition. Those behaviors are prohibited. Now, why would that be? After all, isn’t it a good thing to remember how someone else treated you, especially if it was poorly?

Well, yes, but up to a point. After a certain point, you’re not acting in such a way as to protect yourself. In fact, you’re hurting yourself, you’re hurting your neighbor, you’re hurting the entire community. As we have learned, it’s forgetfulness that makes the world fit for human habitation.

What is the better course to take? It’s to lend your neighbor your shovel, because it’s the right thing to do. Period. As the text itself says, “Don’t take vengeance, don’t even bear a grudge; rather, love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lev. 19:18) To focus so much attention on what he did to you the other day is to remember too much; it’s to remain stuck in the past and to avoid moving toward the future.

In other words, “Forget about it!”

We’re not the only ones who need to forget sometimes as well as to remember. In our tradition, even God forgets—on purpose.

In the midrash collection known as Tanna De-Vei Eliyahu (1:2), it explores that famous saying in Pirkei Avot: “Who is truly wealthy? The one who is happy with his portion.” We usually understand this pitgam, this aphorism, to refer to people, to understand it to be urging us to step back from materialism.

2 Or, as it is spelled in Brooklyn, “Fuhgeddaboudit!” See: https://www.flickr.com/photos/jag9889/12055231814.
and greed. But the midrash says that it applies to God. Since God is of course, supreme, God must be supremely wealthy, which means that he must be happy with his portion. And what is his portion? Us. The problem though is this:

If God were to remember everything, then God would remember our shortcomings, our bickering, our pettiness, ... ways we don't measure up to our potential. How could God be happy if God were burdened with all of these unfortunate, involuntary memories [of how we've behaved]? So the Midrash tells us that God actually does not remember everything! God decides what is worth recalling and what is worth forgetting, what is worth pushing aside.

And because God does this—maybe ONLY because God does this—God is content with his lot.

Rabbi Brad Artson, who has analyzed this midrash, talks about the need for what he calls, “deliberate, holy forgetting.” If we forget snubs, forget being overlooked, forget the misspoken words and the insults, we can help make the world worth living in.

This is essential in so many areas.

How many marriages could survive if each partner remembered everything? There isn't a successful marriage around in which both partners have not cultivated the art of holy forgetting: forgetting the missed opportunity, the offhand remark, the inappropriate comment or gift, and just letting it go [—just “forgetting about it]."

The same is true of nations. They too must strike a balance between remembering and forgetting. This is rarely easy.

As David Rieff, the author of In Praise of Forgetting, points out, “toxic memories [can] fuel atavistic hatred,” and a nation’s “collective memory [can] lead to war rather than peace ... and to the determination to exact revenge rather than commit to the hard work of forgiveness.” Sometimes, he thinks, we would be better off simply forgetting [our] grudge-filled chronicles and getting on with living our lives.” (Review by Gary J. Bass, New York Times Book Review)
The philosopher Miroslav Volf, in his book, *The End of Memory*, says that “the just sword of memory often severs the very good it seeks to defend.” “Memories[,] he adds, should be] a wellspring of healing rather than a source of deepening pain and animosity.”

This is obviously not just a Jewish issue.

In preparing my remarks today, I took a look at a 1951 High Holiday sermon on the subject of *Remembering and Forgetting* written by the late Rabbi Sidney Greenberg, who served Temple Sinai in Philadelphia for over fifty years. I was intrigued by a poem he quoted, entitled, “Old-Year Memories.” In part, it reads as follows:

Let us forget the things that vexed and tried us,
   The worrying things that caused our souls to fret;
The hopes that, cherished long, were still denied us,
   Let us forget.

Let us forget the little slights that pained us,
   The greater wrongs that rankle sometimes yet,
The pride with which some lofty one disdained us—
   Let us forget.

But blessings manifold, past all deserving,
   Kind words and thoughtful deeds, a countless throng,
The faults o’ercome, the rectitude unswerving,
   Let us remember long.

The sacrifice of love, the generous giving,
   When friends were few, the handclasp warm and strong,
The fragrance of each life of holy living,
   Let us remember long.

Rabbi Greenberg didn’t indicate who wrote the poem or where it might be found, but thanks to Google—which, as we know, *forgets nothing* and which, in our generation, *makes the world habitable*, I was able to find the source in about five minutes. The poem was written by Susan E. Gammon, and it appeared in a Seventh Day Adventist magazine published in 1917.

Now, I have no idea how in the pre-internet age, Rabbi Greenberg found this
poem, but I was moved to see how deeply universal this human need is to both remember and forget.

In the medieval Jewish ethics volume, *Hovot HaLevavot, or Duties of the Heart*, we are taught that were it not for the ability to forget, no one would ever be free from sorrow. No joyous occasion would ever dispel sadness. One would never refrain from grieving.

So, as we prepare to recite Yizkor prayers, let’s keep in mind the wisdom of Rabbi Greenberg, who wrote, “Let us remember that we shall be what we remember. Our memories will mold our action and what others will remember of us will be determined by what we choose to remember.”

Let us choose wisely.

G’mar Hatimah Tovah: May all of us be inscribed and sealed—*and remembered*—for a good and blessed life in the New Year. Amen.