

Remembering What Makes Life Worth Living

Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman

Tonight I am going to speak about memory. Looking over my sermons these past years, it's interesting to note that "memory" has been a perennial theme for me. Not surprising since the experience of memory is such an essential part of our Holy Day experience, especially Kol Nidre.

Kol Nidre. There is awe in these ancient words that transcend the times. Kol Nidre sings to us from the graves of our ancestors, like a haunted wind, it blows into our souls touching us in a very deep place.

The history of Kol Nidre is cloaked in mystery. The first known mention is in the 9th century, but its roots probably go back as far as the first or second century of the Common Era. The words of Kol Nidre are very old, ancient even, but that, in itself, is not unique to our tradition; most of which is ancient and very little as stirring as Kol Nidre.

Besides the words themselves, we have the melody, a deep eerie chant of origins unknown. Some say that the music of Kol Nidre comes from Spain during the inquisition. Marranos, Jews forced to convert to Christianity under punishment of death, once a year would secretly meet on erev Yom Kippur and chant Kol Nidre, an absolution of vows. Thus, they would seek forgiveness for their apostasy, pouring out their souls, expressing their loss and their humiliation through the words and the plaintive melody we still use to this very day.

No one really knows the origins of Kol Nidre. Its history is obscured by the centuries. The truth is, we don't need to nail down the facts of this ancient rite to feel its power, for the power of Kol Nidre and the import of its message transcends its origins. Its power lies not in its history, but in the wellspring of Jewish memory from which it draws.

You see, more than anything else, Kol Nidre speaks to us of our collective past, of the world of our forefathers and foremothers and their lives, which live on through our memory. How else can one explain the power of this prayer?

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism, and one of the greatest rabbis ever to live taught that, "Exile is in forgetting and redemption is in memory." The Besht taught from the heart of Jewish tradition. He knew that one of our keys to survival was our ability to remember where we came from, our traditions, our stories and our rituals. In Judaism, there are countless examples of how this works; the Hebrew we pray in, the Torah we venerate and study, our Holy Day & Holiday cycle and of course, the ancient words of the liturgy including Kol Nidre. No doubt, the Besht has a point – memory in some ways is redemptive allowing us to survive and even thrive as a unique and distinct people while other great civilizations have long disappeared.

For a long time my thoughts on memory stopped here, with the assumption that it was a central, redemptive feature of our tradition, one of our secrets of survival. Recently, however, I've begun to second-guess the Baal Shem Tov, or at least to look more closely at memory and its role in our lives, as a people and as individuals. What I have come to realize is that in fact memory is a tricky thing.

Mark Twain once said, "I have such a good memory that I recall things that never happened." Mark Twain was making fun, but in fact, his "tongue and cheek" remark about memory points to its mercurial nature. Without a doubt, memory is a great blessing, the vehicle that enables both nations and individuals to survive. Nevertheless, it can also be a curse, which can ruin our lives, deprive us of happiness and destroy our peace of mind. Memory can be troublesome for a number of reasons.

Memory can make yesterday seem better than it actually was. We can become nostalgic and sentimental about the past, about our childhood and family home, about "the good old days." Thomas Wolfe once observed, "You can't go home again." Why? Because what once seemed grand as a child, quite likely now, looks small and maybe even shabby. The enormous tree you climbed is just a scrubby old pine, and the grand synagogue you prayed in, seems small, and dingy.... What changed? Not the tree or the Temple. As the author of Ecclesiastes put it, "Do not say, how was it that former times were better than these? For that is a question not prompted by wisdom." (7:10)

We are a sentimental people. In fact, I think it is part of how we have survived the centuries of trauma. This seems especially true to me in regards to the way we view life in the shtetle, the old country. You know, back there in the old country, when life was simpler, more meaningful, and when everyone went to synagogue every shabbas! Back then, people really knew how to be Jewish! You know, like Fiddler on the Roof.

Our time in the shtetle was meaningful in many ways. So much of the Jewish life we take for granted developed there. Nevertheless, let's be clear; the old country was a tough, hard, oppressive life. We were mostly poor and powerless, and our days were marked by fear and persecution. There was little freedom, privacy, or the basic rights we take for granted. I think it is safe to say, that no one here would choose to return to the shtetle of old. We wouldn't go back with a clear sight of what it was like, nevertheless, through the rose colored lenses of memory, it can look pretty good. "If I were a rich man..."

This is true of the shtetle, and it is true in our everyday lives as well. The rose colored lenses of memory can be a real stumbling block to appreciating what we have in the present.

I encounter this often with people who relocate to Santa Rosa. Perhaps their spouse gets a job in the area. Or, perhaps a family moves aging parents/grandparents from where they have lived for many years to an assisted living facility here. In both cases, there is some real loss; the spouse without the new job may have given up a lot to come here, the older parent or grandparent may really miss home. The challenges arise when the past for these people become like the Garden of Eden, that perfect place from which everything else pales in comparison.... When this happens, when those "rose colored glasses" are on, it becomes very difficult to see the blessings of the

present, how beautiful the county is, what a lovely quality of life we have here, how much better it is to be closer to our families and loved ones.

Sentimentality can also prevent us from honestly assessing what was unhealthy or even downright harmful in our past. The extreme example of this is battered women, who sadly talk themselves into believing that “he really wasn’t so bad.” Or, “so what if he hits me every once and a while, when we are together it’s so good. Besides, he really does love me and we need each other.”

That’s the extreme, but even if you are not a battered woman, it’s easy to fall prey to unhealthy sentimentality. Recently, a man I knew began to write his autobiography – memoirs of a sort. He told me about his project, and we were both excited; he had lived a rich and hard life and I thought his memoirs would be both interesting and therapeutic for him; then I received the first installment in the mail. It was as if he was writing about another person. His father was an alcoholic and he had struggled with addiction but somehow, when he went to write his autobiography, no mention was made of this difficult but important part in his life. He had struggled with his kids – lost touch with them, had real falling outs, the real hard stuff – it wasn’t there at all! In fact, when I read his memoir, it was like reading about the Brady Bunch or some other paradigm of the perfect American family. This surprised me, but worse than that, it really hurt his children and resulted in further distancing himself from everyone. In essence, his act of memory was more like an act of denial that shut the doors to any true act of teshuvah, or healing for him and his family.

For our memories to be redemptive, they must reflect what really happened. Redemption only happens, the seas only part, when we tell the truth. This is quite a challenge because it forces us to face who we really are, the emes of our lives, and the truth of our existence then and now.

Being too sentimental about our past is one pitfall of memory. Another real challenge to memory runs in the opposite direction, allowing the pain of the past to overwhelm us. In that sense, our past can be like a black fog obscuring our view, threatening to plunge us completely in the dark.

Lets face it; the shadow of memory looms large for us Jews. This is especially evident when it comes to the Shoah, the Holocaust and the centuries of persecution that led up to the Shoah.

The more I look at the effect of this collective memory on contemporary Jewish life, the more I see how problematic it is. We are a traumatized people. We suffer from a kind of collective Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome where we cannot move beyond our own pain, shock and grief. This is understandable. World War II was not very long ago. Our suffering was immense – beyond imagining – and the world has yet to fully come to terms with what happened. Nevertheless, there is no future for us, no redemption in our collective conscience, if it is defined by what the Nazis and others did to us. Somehow, we must find a way to remember our past without the pain of our long tortured history overwhelming us. We cannot bring back the dead, but we can live in ways that affirm who they were. Defining Jewish life and a Jewish future primarily as a response to our near destruction will do little to honor the memory of those millions murdered by the Nazis. Via Negtiva, “Never Again,” is not meaningful in itself. It must be followed up with a vision of a Jewish life worth living.

The toxicity of memory is not just a problem for us as a people. We as individuals struggle mightily with the shadow of memory as well. We suffer some of us more than others do, but all of us suffer. Sickness and failure are part of existence. The question is, not whether we suffer, but whether we are defined by our suffering? We sit here tonight, some of us alone for the first time. Others, even after many years, can't help but remember with sorrow a loved one who was once here and is now gone. Some of us have personally experienced horrible things and they haunt us, stalk us like a hungry dog, waiting to snap up whatever pleasure we might get out of life. This is memory in its most toxic form. There is no redemption in this memory, just pain. For some, there's little to do. Life can break us. For others however, there is a way to cool the fires of rage and pain that memory provokes. In such cases, it is a matter of choice.

An older colleague of mine tells a story. He watched two brothers in his congregation who sat across from each other in the front row of the synagogue for years. For years, they sat across from each other yet they hardly acknowledged each other's presence. Finally, the rabbi asked what had happened. What was the response? "Well rabbi, me and David had an argument a number of years ago." The rabbi interrupted. "How long ago." Oh, at least 30 years if not more." "What was it about?" he asked. His response, "To tell you the truth rabbi, I don't even remember, but I sure was mad!" Now that is a toxic memory that is destructive beyond the memory itself!

This seems silly but it has an edge in which we all can relate. Perhaps you've heard the joke, which is really not so funny: "When me and my spouse argue she/he gets historical. You mean hysterical. No, historical, recounting every slight, every hurt, every disappointment over the length of our marriage."

Sound familiar? Our memories can really hurt us. Sometimes there is little we can do to heal from the wounds of the past, but other times we can choose to put what happened in the past in its proper place, and move on.

Not so easy, I know. One of the reasons it is hard to stop nursing the pain of the past is that we actually get some comfort from holding on to our suffering. It temporarily fills a hole. One experiences this especially in mourning. Mourning hurts and a period of mourning is essential for healing (not closure....) but what happens when mourning gets excessive...it is true, while we mourn, we feel some proximity to what we have lost. There is comfort there, but it is limited and limiting. You see, we can't bring them back no matter how often we visit their grave or shed a tear. And, as long as we feed the part of our heart that yearns to mourn, we are not able to get on with our lives. This is true for us as individuals and I believe it is also true for the Jewish people as a whole. If we had two hearts, we could mourn the centuries of persecution and suffering with one, and love life with the other. The problem is – we only have one heart, and the Jewish heart cannot support all the sorrow of the ages while at the same time embracing life and the promise that life still offers us as a people and as individuals.

There is one other aspect of memory that I want to touch on tonight and that is memory that leads to guilt. What a Jewish topic!

A psychiatrist once remarked that his Jewish patients have guilty feelings about having guilty feelings!

The stereotype of Jewish guilt is surely exaggerated. Still it points to yet another slippery slope of memory. This is where memory and forgiveness begin to merge. I am young – 41 – and I am only in my 8th year as a rabbi. Still in those years, I have experienced second hand, more regret, more guilt, more self-flagellation than one can imagine.

There is so much power in the word “if”. “If I’d only called the doctor in time”; “if I had only slowed down”; “if I wouldn’t have moved so far from my parents”; “if I would’ve just spent more time with my kids”; “if I hadn’t looked away I could have saved him.”

Memories that lead to guilt are like leeches that suck the lifeblood right out of us. Guilt cannot bring back the dead, or save lost relationships or mend any wounds. Guilt may be a Jewish cultural norm, but it is not necessarily a Jewish value. In fact, the whole premise of these Holy Days is that we can rid ourselves of guilt by doing teshuvah. Jewish culture may foster “the guilt response”, but our tradition does not. In fact, one of Yom Kippur’s central messages is that there comes a time when all we can say is “we’re sorry” and if we are truly sorry, that’s enough – God takes care of the rest. Isn’t that what atonement is all about?

Is it true that memory leads to redemption? Sometimes; the truth is, we wouldn’t be here today if we were without our memories. Little is as precious to us as the chain of Jewish tradition that we pass down from one generation to the next primarily through memory.

Kol Nidre is an excellent example of the positive power of memory in our tradition. First, it stirs us, hard to be sentimental in the face of such an awe-inspiring ritual. Second, even though it wells up from the sorrow of our past, it somehow both soothes and agitates, comforts and awakens in us the feelings and the strength we need to do what this Holy of Holy days calls us to do – to look at ourselves with a naked eye and commit to change in the year ahead. Finally, if we pay attention to the words, we see that it says no to guilt, annulling what we did not accomplish in spite of our best efforts.

Where would we be without memory? We’d be like the pyramids of Egypt or the ruins of Rome. We’d be an echo of the past, a tired remnant of what was and what is lost forever. Nevertheless, a memory that leads to redemption is not such a simple thing. No, memory is just as likely to lead us astray as it is to guide us healthily into the future. Memory is both friend and foe, to be cultivated, but also to be guarded, not lest we forget, but lest we remember the wrong things and forget what makes life worth living.

Zokhreinu l’chaiyim, melekh Hafetz bakhayim, v’chatveinu bsefer hakhayim, l’ma-ankha elohim Chaiyim.

Remember us on to life Oh God who delights in life, and inscribe us in the book of life for your own sake, Oh God of life.