

Rosh Hashanah 2017

© 2017 Rabbi Adina Lewittes: **Un-Remembering**

Sometimes he knows who I am; sometimes he doesn't. I'm not sure which is better. My father's dementia at times coddles him in blissful bewilderment, but at others cruelly allows in just enough awareness to remind him of how much he is no longer aware. He'll sometimes cry at the sound of my voice, one he recognizes he no longer recognizes, or at the sight of my face, one he knows he no longer knows.

My father inhabits my thoughts this Rosh Hashanah in part because it is a time for teshuvah, for inner reckonings, and our relationship has been fraught for the better part of my life, only a few years ago giving way to a detente in recognition of his failing health and my own need for healing. It is a return to amicability that requires continued attention. Yet, ironically, there are times when our truce requires precisely the opposite, a forgetting of sorts.

Sometimes memory is an obstacle to reconciliation, which is an odd insight to share on Rosh Hashanah, the first of the ten days of teshuvah, or return, also known as Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Remembrance. What happens when remembering precludes forgiveness? How does one without memory participate in remembering? Can one without memory know they're being remembered?

These are impressions and questions that are deeply personal and often painful. They are also at the heart of much thinking about American life today, and no less about Jewish life. When does memory serve the task of reconciliation and renewal, and when is forgetting a more compassionate, more righteous, more transformative offering?

The resurgence of racism and antisemitism in this country is a frightening, vexing phenomenon. No explanation for hate-filled, murderous rallies could justify the threats they pose, threats that demand clear enforcement of the boundaries between free speech and incitement. Still, one feature of the unrest hinges on equally vexing questions.

The debate over the removal of Confederate statues centers on the relationship between history and memory. If the role of history is to record and chronicle the past, the role of memory is to recall the past in such a way as to learn from it about living in the present and aspiring towards a better future. These two tasks require different tools, and speak different languages.

The argument that taking down Confederate monuments is akin to erasing the history of the Civil War and its leaders has been made not only by agitators who use this reasoning as a thinly veiled effort to promote racism, but also by well-meaning people who celebrate our nation's diversity, yet are concerned about preserving the record of how we got here.

We would be naive to think that history is ever objective. Not only historians but also philosophers and psychologists have remarked that history is what we *choose* to remember about the past, shaped by the particular way in which we remember it.

With respect to Confederate history, the debate isn't over whether the events happened or the leaders existed; it's over what we choose to remember about them, and what we choose to forget.

What is it that we wish those who behold these monuments to learn? Which stories do we want our monuments to tell? Which details need to be preserved, and which which need to be set aside, what framing needs to be created and what framing needs to be dismantled, in order to tell those stories?

Un-remembering certain dimensions of history, such as the venerating of racist Confederate generals and the racist symbolism of the Confederate flag, may be critical to illuminating the lessons of that era for us today as we continue struggling to build just and equal societies, and for those who will carry on the task after us.

Judaism has always had a unique relationship with the past, shaped by our ingenious use of memory. Memory in Judaism is about cultivating and strengthening Jewish identity. Memory is an active pursuit. It's never simply the rehashing of long-ago events. Selected sacred myths are retold using liturgy and ritual, creating a sense of belonging for us storytellers. But retelling our

mythic past is more than just narrative consciousness-raising; it becomes the source of obligation, making real moral, spiritual and communal claims upon us in our efforts to build a strong, vital future. A few examples will illustrate.

Unrooted in any scientific theory of evolution, we remember every seventh day as the culmination of the creation of the world. Refraining from work or creative labor on Shabbat, we use ritual, prayer, family time, nature and special meals to ponder the memory and meaning of our having been created, too. And we're mandated to enable everyone else in our homes or in our employ to do the same so that we all emerge into the following week more attuned to our responsibilities for the sustainability of our planet, of humanity, and of the Jewish people.

Lacking any empirical evidence of Jewish slaves in Egypt, we are nonetheless commanded to recall our slavery and relive our liberation as if we ourselves had been there. Memories of Egypt sung, eaten and narrated around the Seder table and for 6 more days afterwards command their own practical response: free the enslaved, relieve the suffering, and embrace the stranger.

On Tisha B'Av we recall the destruction of the ancient Temples by reading Jeremiah's first-hand testimony, and we mourn the suffering by denying ourselves food and water, by sitting on low stools and avoiding physical comforts. Our memories of being defeated by our enemies are framed by an examination of the additional vulnerability created by hatred between Jews, and by the abrogation of our ethical standards. Commitments to rebuilding sanctuaries of love and justice balance the day's darkness. To this single date are added numerous other dark moments in the Jewish past, writing much of our communal pain into this one day so that future generations will have other, more redemptive stories with which to fill the Jewish calendar.

Through the work of memory, Judaism takes the legendary past and makes it a purposeful, unifying platform on which to stabilize the present and launch a coherent vision for the future, neither living in longed-for yesterdays, nor wandering aimlessly in search of tomorrows.

Yehuda Kurtzer, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America where I'm honored to serve as faculty, is first and foremost a historian. In his powerful book, Shuvah: The Future of the Jewish Past, Yehuda notes how, in an unfortunate shift over the last few centuries, Jews have largely abandoned memory for history. With the tools of science, archeology, anthropology, genealogy and other fields, we have become adept at telling the facts and calculating the figures of our four thousand year saga. Jewish museums dot the landscapes of large, and even many smaller, cities across the globe. And yet, the more we know about our origins and evolution, the less we seem connected to them. The more history we tell, the fewer memories we relive.

Yehuda then outlines a vision for reclaiming the use of memory -- ancient and contemporary -- as a strategy for reinvigorating Jewish identity. If we can change how we think about our past, he suggests, maybe it will change who we are today. But now in the 21st century with the tools and information we've gained, we must do so, he teaches, using the approaches of *both history and memory, knowledge and meaning*.

Yehuda cautions us in this enterprise. I'll share his warnings, and offer some illustrations of them. In revitalizing memory, we mustn't whitewash the failures of the past. "...[H]istory, *applied correctly*," he notes, "*is an ethical tool by which we use our consciousness of what has preceded us to make better and more informed choices for the future.*" Remembrance demands honesty and integrity. For example, in recent years, stories about the founding of the State of Israel have surfaced that include episodes involving the forced displacement of, and even unprovoked aggression towards, native Arab villages and families. While these stories do not -- must not -- impinge upon the legitimacy of the existence of Medinat Yisrael, they have raised troubling questions for many, and have ignited important discussions about our moral and political responsibilities to and for those with whom we share the land of Israel.

In the same vein, Yehuda also warns we mustn't over-mythologize the past, reducing the complexity and multidimensionality of our Jewish story into shallow, narrow nostalgia. For example, it's facile and untrue to suggest that all forms of Jewish practice outside of the Orthodox world represent a rejection of traditional Jewish values, or are mere way-stations on the inevitable path towards total and complete assimilation. It's facile and untrue to suggest that

until the Enlightenment Jewish families and communities had a shared set of Jewish doctrines and practices that united and protected us. Open any page of Talmud and you will see a vigorously debated tradition that took the form of many and varied approaches to ritual observance and belief. The difference is that the diversity existed within a community that for the most part, with notable exceptions, accepted difference without politicizing or demonizing others, as we do often today. Wasn't it just a few weeks ago that a former Chief Rabbi in Israel suggested Reform Jews were just like Nazis, decimating Judaism and the Jewish people?

And, argues Yehuda, we must be comfortable knowing that each time we recall a memory, it may mean something a little different than it had meant earlier. Memory, as we know from cognitive science, is unstable; a memory changes each time we recollect it. Perhaps it's we who've changed and so we foreground different details or layers of the memory. Either way, using memory to rekindle identity means embracing its dynamic energy and its capacity to change -- just like us. It means accepting that at times the same memory may yield different insights, and lead to different obligations.

Consider Tu B'Shevat, the mid-Winter "new year of the trees", which started out as a minor holiday helping farmers gauge the age of their trees, then morphed into a kabbalistic celebration in the 16th century with a Tu B'Shvat seder imparting mystical significance to certain fruits of the land of Israel. The early Zionists used Tu B'Shvat to encourage tree planting in Israel to restore the ecological viability of the land while symbolizing our replanting ourselves in its earth, while in modern times Tu B'Shvat became an occasion to support all kinds of Israeli ecological projects, whether making her desert bloom or desalinating her water. Today the holiday has expanded its Israel focus to include teaching about Jewish responsibility to be stewards of nature and guardians of our planet's well-being. The same festival has survived all these iterations and has grown in its relevance and import.

Most provocatively, Yehuda cautions against holding on to the past even when it has outlived its purpose. Not everything in history has a story that's worth telling. He argues for "systems of evaluation" that will help us determine, in his words, "*what needs to be kept and what can go into long-term storage.*"

The risk of lacking these particular filters in the project of rekindling Jewish memory, and Jewish identity, isn't only being overwhelmed trying to figure out what to continue privileging in Jewish life and what to set aside. The risk is that without a clear values-based approach with which to select and retell the stories of our past, our memories may seem irrelevant to today's realities, and out of synch with the future we wish them to inspire. For example, in today's world of unprecedented interaction between diverse religions and cultures, in our complex constellations of fluid and hybrid identities, as families made of different combinations of racial, religious, cultural, sexual and gender identities make their home in our communities and devote themselves to Jewish life, the picture of a Jewish family depicted by the presence of only white, straight, and even only Jewish relatives, is rapidly, and rightly, making its way to the archives.

Yehuda here asks the same question of Judaism I opened with: in what way can forgetting be crucial to the sacred task of remembering? How do we understand our responsibilities, as Jews, and as Americans, to un-remember on this Yom HaZikaron, this Day of Remembrance? But let's take it even deeper: what might it all mean for our personal, private journeys of renewal?

It's long been a widely-held assumption that a major mark of intelligence is someone's ability to master and retain vast amounts of information. Think of the massive quantities of knowledge doctors must recall, and pilots, professors, and rabbis too.

And yet, scientists are discovering that the ability to remember as much as we do requires that we do a considerable amount of forgetting. Forgetting, they say, is key to a healthy mind. But it's more than that. Measuring intelligence by our capacity to forget as much as our capacity to remember represents a major cultural shift that just may save our relationships, human and divine.

Like decluttering our closets to make room for new clothes, we need to, and we do, let go of information we no longer deem useful. And I'm not just speaking about information we lose track of; I'm talking about willful forgetting, a task for which there's even a neural circuit in our brains.

Forgetting is adaptive. We push aside unnecessary information so that new information can take root. When our friend moves to a new home, we undergo a process whereby we gradually, but willfully, forget their old address so we can begin to store their new one because we no longer need that old address. The key is to be judicious, especially on this Day of Judgement, about what we choose to forget; to discriminate between important and unimportant memories, between those that may be disturbing, and those that are useful to problem solving and personal growth.

The idea of manipulating our memories has captured popular imagination. One of the catchiest and most hilarious musical moments in the Broadway hit, *The Book of Mormon*, is when Elder McKinley tries to help Elder Price deal with his gay thoughts by singing “Turn it off”:

<i>I got a feeling,</i>	<i>When you start to get confused because of</i>
<i>That you could be feeling,</i>	<i>thoughts in your head,</i>
<i>A whole lot better than you feel today</i>	<i>Don't feel those feelings!</i>
<i>You say you got a problem,</i>	<i>Hold them in instead</i>
<i>well that's no problem,</i>	<i>Turn it off, like a light switch</i>
<i>It's super easy not to feel that way!</i>	<i>just go click!</i>
	<i>It's a cool little Mormon trick!</i>

We know we can't just turn on and off memories or feelings like a lightswitch, and if we can, it's probably not a very healthy skill.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is a movie that explores the hypothetical blessings and burdens if we were able to have selected memories erased from our minds. The crime show *Unforgettable* traces the uncanny powers of Detective Carrie Wells of an NYPD Homicide unit who suffers from a rare disease called hyperthymesia which essentially enables her to remember every single detail of every single day of her life and of everything she sees and everyone she encounters making her a successful detective but a very troubled human being, particularly in her romantic life. She can't forget any missteps or foibles of her partner, reminding him endlessly of

his mistakes with their precise day, time and place. I bet many of you suspect your own partners suffer from hyperthymia as well. I know mine does.

The reality is we each have different needs when it comes to remembering and forgetting. What we share is that recalling everything that's ever happened to us or every feeling we've ever felt doesn't always serve us, while the ability to selectively forget can strengthen our emotional intelligence as well as our character.

How many of us hold on to grievances, anger and disappointment about which there is nothing more to do, only to end up limiting our capacity to move forward in our relationships and develop other parts of ourselves? Rumination is a known risk factor for depression, as people with chronic PTSD can attest when memory precludes normal living. It can contribute to all kinds of strife.

Far from getting revenge on a foe, clinging to traumatic or heartbreaking memories causes ourselves great suffering. Willful forgetting, giving ourselves permission to stop renting space in our heads to people and memories that don't serve our goals or dreams is a key life skill.

But there's good forgetting and bad forgetting. Repressing painful memories has limited usefulness, as Dr. Freud taught us. It may relieve an immediate discomfort, but the memory, if not processed in some way, will surely return, sometimes with a vengeance. Often the resolutions to some of our most troubling challenges are contained within, or inspired by, our memories, and we can, and must, revisit them without being paralyzed by them. And as I noted earlier, memory is unstable; when we recall them they're always changed somewhat, so there's always some natural forgetting working in synch with our attempts to come to terms with our pasts.

We also can't run away from the lessons of our experiences which requires reflecting on the choices we, and others we care about, have made. The pain we experience from certain memories often serves as a wake-up call, alerting us to parts of our lives that need more

attention, more healing. Memory will always play a role on our own transformations. But what happens when it prevents them?

These Days of Awe are the ten days of repentance, of seeking and offering forgiveness, to ourselves and to one another. Focusing on what we ought to remember about ourselves and others as a goad towards forgiveness -- our virtues, our strengths, our values, the love we share, the dreams we have -- is one way of working towards the reconciliations and renewal that this season impels us to pursue. But memories, especially negative ones, have a way of obstructing that work.

*How will I ever forget the hateful words she said to me? How can I ever shut out the pain he caused me? How could I ever let go of that sense of humiliation, my badge of victimhood, which has defined me for so long? How will I ever stop thinking about how I betrayed my friend? How will I know myself without the memories that have made me who I am, without my emotional records documenting my life story, where I've been and how I've felt? Perhaps precisely through forgiveness.*

It's been shown that forgiveness leads to some healthy forgetting. When indiscretions and aggressions have been apologized for, repented for, and forgiveness has been granted, the memory of them begins to fade, and their details, once obstacles to our emotional wellbeing, begin to recede. It's likely that the relationship goes both ways: that some willful forgetting also opens the pathway to forgiveness, as the sharpness of our recollections soften and their angles are reshaped, making room for other possibilities, for ourselves, and for others.

I spent a week this summer with my cousin Andrew who's a few years older than I am. We grew up together, shared a strong relationship with our grandparents, and with our parents who were close siblings. We had never spent time like this before; as adults we usually just catch up each year or two at a family Bar Mitzvah or wedding. This week changed my life. We spent time telling each other the same intimate stories about our family's history, but hearing them for the first time from each other's perspective. I was awed by some of Andrew's insights and experiences, some so different from my own, even of the same event. Andrew's narrative

empowered me to let go of some of the memories I've clung to to make sense of my childhood, and humbled me to make room for others I had never even considered. My own story has changed somewhat, but I am still me; my life was, and still is, my life. But my personal dance between remembering and forgetting learned a whole new choreography, some moves more complex, but others more fluid, teaching me a whole new level of grace.

The Ba'al Shem Tov is often quoted as teaching that remembrance is what leads to redemption, and forgetfulness to exile, a teaching that might seem opposite to all I've been trying to say. But he also taught that it's critical to "give over" Torah, to share of our insights and wisdom, in order to open ourselves to receive more Torah, to stimulate the heavens to pour more understanding and knowledge into our hearts; that we must undergo an emptying of sorts, in order to be refilled.

It is my prayer that in my work as a rabbi, the Torah I endeavor to share opens me to learn ever more Torah, and to grow in mind, heart and soul from this endless flow of learning and teaching and learning more. And it is my prayer, on this Day of Remembrance, that you find what it is you may be willing to forget, so that you may in the coming year and years, remember who you truly are, who you truly aspire to be, and live the life you are reminded you're capable of living.

A final thought:

Sometimes when I look at my four magnificent, adult children I struggle to recall certain images of them from when they were babies, toddlers and tweens. I become so frustrated that images I know I once knew are mercilessly beyond my mental recall now.

But when I watch them making their way through high school, college, first jobs and first loves, I know I'm best able to take in and delight in all their wondrous growth, their expanding minds, their evolving passions and our endlessly deepening love in ways I probably could never absorb if I forced myself to hang onto every moment that's ever come before. And I trust in the solid, eternal foundation *those* moments created for *these*.

And when I gaze into my father's listless face, or listen to his faint, faraway voice, I pray that all that he knows he no longer knows, and all that I know that I no longer wish to know, creates

some room for the few new, if fleeting, memories of reconnection between father and daughter we may yet have time to make.

Shanah Tovah.