

Zachor: History and Memory

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Yom Kippur is difficult. It is a challenge to relate to this observance. It is not the same as the other Jewish festivals, and yet we are all here, gathered in the unique numbers that are the evidence of its power to move us. Yom Kippur is removed not only from the earthly, but also from time. Yom Kippur has no real historical narrative or memory. In contrast, it is often easier to relate to the other Jewish holidays. They are primarily defined by a compelling story.

Passover retells the exodus from Egypt. Shavuot commemorates standing at Mt. Sinai and receiving the Ten Commandments and the Torah. At Sukkot, we remember the forty years of wandering in the desert wilderness. On Purim we read of Esther, Mordecai, and Shushan in Persia. Hanukkah takes place in Modi'in and Jerusalem and recalls the war of the Maccabees against the Syrian Greeks. Tisha B'Av marks the destructions of the First and Second Temple. And modern events are commemorated at Yom HaAtzma-ut—Israel Independence Day and Yom HaShoah—Holocaust Remembrance Day.

But Yom Kippur is largely removed from any historical context, which might seem a bit strange given the fact that Judaism is so deeply tied to history. In Judaism, God is experienced through history. Without that sense of history we are left with Universal Monotheism, a theology in complete agreement with Deism, Universalism, or Ethical Culture. Especially Reform Judaism is consistent with most enlightened forms of faith. But, in addition to the universal, there is also the particular, and that is what sets Judaism apart.

We are defined by historical experience. Yes, we are children of the One God, but we are also children of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel and Leah. Jews are obsessed with history. We retell the stories of ancient Egypt, the Babylonian exile of 586 BCE, of Rome after the year 70, or Spain of 1492. We study the communities of North Africa, or Ashkenaz of Central Europe of the medieval era. Many of us relate especially to Eastern Europe of the backward Shtetl or of cosmopolitan Warsaw. History also took the Jews to Amsterdam and the New World of the Americas. More modern history focuses on the Holocaust and Israel. It is impossible to remove the Jewish experience from its historical context.

One of most important, defining, seminal works of intellectual thought is a modest book, Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory, by Yosef Haim Yerushalmi of Harvard. It points to the difference between what is history and what is memory. History is fact. It is what happened. Memory is how we remember, interpret, and create a narrative. Take for example the Egypt story of the Torah. Did it happen? Was it a fact? Were we slaves? Did Moses exist? Which Pharaoh experienced the Ten Plagues? Those might be questions of history.

But memory is different. It helps define our attitude to the present. We recall the slavery in Egypt as a warning to not enslave others. We are taught: You were slaves in Egypt, therefore always remember, and always fight against oppression and slavery. You were strangers in a strange land, therefore defend the stranger. Treat the stranger in your midst as the native.

So too, our memory of immigration and Ellis Island helps us understand the truths we learn. This summer, when DACA was overturned, in our service that Friday night I turned to Psalm 126: A Song of Ascents—Shir HaMa'alot. To some of you it's familiar from summer camp or Birkat HaMazon, grace after meals for Shabbat.

Its origins are in the memory of the ancient exile in Babylon. "Shir HaMa'alot, b'shuv Adonai, et shivat Zion, hayinu kiCholmim." "When the Eternal restored the fortunes of the exiles from Zion, it was if we were Dreamers!"

Both history and memory matter. They help define our values, what we stand for, how we think of ourselves. But history is objective fact. Memory is the way we contextualize and understand experience, and it can be used or abused. Memory can help to enlighten the future or distort the reality of the past. It can expose truth or be misused to support lies and rejected ideologies.

The battle over narrative became very real this summer in Charlottesville, Virginia. I will have much more to say tomorrow about those events. I think that Charlottesville demands more than one 12 minute or 15 minute sermon. But tonight I want to focus on the conflict over history and narrative. The statues of Confederate heroes were the catalysts, excuses for the racist march on Charlottesville. It was a perfect example of the use and abuse of memory. Charlottesville exposed the desire of some to remember the past as well as their desire to forget and pervert that history. In Charlottesville, a certain specific reading of history was used to divide us. Its purpose was to continue to feed the resentment of the "lost noble cause" of the Confederacy. It nurtured the fantasy of a better time when whites were privileged because blacks were oppressed.

Robert E Lee and Stonewall Jackson were not only military commanders, but they led a revolt against our nation. There are no statues in America to Benedict Arnold.

There should be no false equivalencies drawn between them, on the one hand, and George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, on the other. Washington and Jefferson were imperfect humans, as are all of us. They were slave owners, but that did not define them. Washington was the founder of our nation, and Jefferson was the author of immortal words of human rights and equality. Washington and Jefferson were Virginians and Southerners, but they were not traitors.

Let me share with you some of the words from a speech by Mitch Landrieu, mayor of New Orleans, at the removal of Confederate statues from that city's center. Landrieu said: "The Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and P.G.T. Beauregard statues were not erected just to honor these men, but as part of the movement which became known as The Cult of the Lost Cause. This 'cult' had one goal—through monuments and other means—to rewrite history to hide the truth, which is that the Confederacy was on the wrong side of humanity."

Those statues were first erected nineteen years after the Civil War. Landrieu continued that they were meant to “rebrand the history of our city and the ideals of a defeated Confederacy. These statues are not just innocent remembrances of a benign history. These monuments purposefully celebrate a fictionalized, sanitized Confederacy; ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement, and the terror it actually stood for.”

This past spring, I had the opportunity to visit the new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. At its dedication, President George W. Bush stated: “A great nation does not hide its history. It faces its flaws and corrects them.” That is the purpose of this remarkable museum. It teaches about the inhumanity of slavery, the murderous evil of the Ku Klux Klan, the lynchings, and Jim Crow. There is a special room set aside to tell the story of Emmett Till. Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman are honored, as are the young Sunday school girls who perished in the bombing of the Birmingham church. There is a remarkable interactive exhibit of the Woolworth lunch counter. This museum of history does what it is supposed to do: expose and confront history.

A few weeks ago, I was in Berlin, Germany visiting our friends at IsrAID. We participated in an art therapy class for pre-school and kindergarten children who were Syrian, Afghani, Yazidi, and Albanian refugees. But, as is so often the case, when I returned to the States friends asked me how I could go to Germany and Berlin after the Holocaust. My answer is that it is especially in Germany that I find a nation that is willing to face, confront, and acknowledge the sins of its past. I can contrast that attitude to what I have experienced elsewhere. In Vienna, Austrians try to portray themselves as victims of Nazism. In Poland, at Auschwitz and Birkenau the unique suffering of the Jews has been overlooked. That has been the case in Kiev at Babi Yar. Especially under Soviet rule, the Holocaust was de-Judaized. Even in Paris, the French do a good job of hiding their complicity. In so many places I have found a desire to paper over or distort history.

To me, Germany, especially Berlin, is different. Instead of denying history, German leadership has chosen to expose and confront the most shameful events of its people’s past. If you have been to Berlin in recent years, you have undoubtedly visited the Holocaust Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Even the name itself is an act of acknowledging the truth. It sits right next to the Brandenburg Gate, centrally located, impossible to miss. There is also the Jewish Museum, designed by Daniel Libeskind. There is the Topography of Terror exhibit in the former SS Gestapo headquarters, and in Potsdam you can visit the Wannsee Villa where the Final Solution was planned.

But of all these museums and sites, I have been most moved by the most mundane, ordinary, easily overlooked commemoration. It is a simple subway station—U-Bahn train station in Wittenbergplatz in the central downtown shopping district. It really is no different from any other well-located U-Bahn station, but outside the station there is a board listing various local train stops. It is similar to what you might see at Ogilvy Transportation Center, listing the Metra stops for the North Shore. In Chicago the sign would read: Evanston, Wilmette, Kenilworth, Indian Hill, Winnetka, Hubbard Woods, and Glencoe.

But in Berlin, the sign outside the Wittenburgplatz station lists:

1. Auschwitz
2. Stutthoff
3. Maidanek
4. Treblinka
5. Theresienstadt
6. Buchenwald
7. Dachau
8. Sachsenhausen
9. Ravensbruck
10. Bergen Belsen

Above the sign, it reads: “Places of terror that we should never forget”

The other moving remembrances of the Holocaust are the stolpersteins, stumbling stones that you happen to “stumble” upon on your daily walks. These are brass plates set in the pavement, usually in front of homes, apartment buildings, sometimes work places. These small brass plaques list the names of those who had once lived or worked in those places but perished. The purpose is to insure that these murdered individuals are never forgotten. You can’t walk by and ignore their deaths and eradications from their own homes, neighborhoods, and communities. You are forced to stumble over that history.

You now can find stolpersteins in France, the Netherlands, Italy, and elsewhere. This summer we were in a small Italian village in Puglia in southeast Italy, and there, unexpectedly we “stumbled” upon one of these brass markers in memory of a villager whom the Nazis had rounded up in Rome and executed in a mass killing.

The goal of the stolpersteins is to expose history so that we are forced to remember it, learn from it, and prevent the recurrence of future acts of inhumanity. Statues and memorials can help us remember, but they can also help us forget and distort and deny. Recall my sermon of last year, “The Heresy of Narcissism.” I tried to offer a contrast between Pharaoh and Moses. What are we to learn from the fact that Moses died alone? Moses has no grave or memorial. Pharaoh is the opposite. He built pyramids, sphinxes, and tombs. Not Moses. The contrast is intended to caution us to beware the idolatry of a thing or place or statue.

I am not denying the power of the Lincoln Memorial, or Washington Monument, or Jefferson Memorial. I visit the new Martin Luther King, Jr. statue and the FDR and Vietnam Memorials. But the teaching of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel has always inspired me, that Jews sanctify time, not space.

Maybe that is why Yom Kippur is removed from history, removed from the earthly. On this sacred day we are to focus on ideas and immutable truths. On Yom Kippur what matters most are our values, not our histories. We are reminded of timeless teachings: Always know what it felt like to be the outcast, the slave, the stranger. Remember, but for a purpose, to inspire action and commitment to build a just world, based on equality, respect, and freedom.

Yes, there is the physical obelisk of the Washington Memorial in DC, but, on this Yom Kippur, following the divisiveness and trauma of this summer, we need to listen to

George Washington's immortal words: Let us hear this prayer, this blessing, this promise, this affirmation. Washington wrote to the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island, saying:

“The government of the United States ... gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.... May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his [and her] own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make them afraid.”

In this New Year, may we be blessed by those words, to live in a land of equality, freedom, security, and peace.

Amen
