

### **We Forget, But Are Never Forgotten**

A few weeks ago I came in for a meeting. This meeting was scheduled to be hybrid with people both on Zoom and in-person. I had remembered to set up the link. I had remembered to email the link to the people who needed it. Upon arrival at the synagogue, I put my bag down on my desk, opened it up and discovered that my laptop was not in there. I had forgotten it at home. Luckily, Jeff came to my rescue and let me borrow his for the meeting, so it was all OK. Just then, I realized, oy! I had forgotten to put backs on my earrings, they were just sitting in my ears!

You'd think that this was just a fluke, we all have days when we would forget our heads if they weren't attached. You could blame it on having a new baby. Being tired. Having a busy schedule. But that would be too generous. Nope. As my husband Dan will tell you, hardly a day goes by that I don't forget *something*.

I've tried sticky notes. I see the note on the counter as I make breakfast, grab it and carry it up upstairs to retrieve the book it reminds me that I need that day...only to leave the sticky note stuck to the cover of the book on the bedside table. I've tried alarms on my phone--I hear it go off, take my lunch out of the fridge and put it on the counter...but it never makes it into the car. When I go to the store, I always pile the groceries in the passenger seat because once, I did all of the shopping for the week, went home and forgot everything in the trunk all day.

Rosh Hashanah has many names. One is Yom HaZikaron, a day of remembrance, a day for remembering. However, Rabbi Alan Lew asks, "...who [is] to remember what? [Is] it a day when God [is] supposed to remember us? [Or are]

we supposed to remember God?”<sup>1</sup> The answer is both, but, Lew continues: “God’s mindfulness of us is the [essence] of this holiday season. If there were no consciousness out there aware of us, responding to us, this whole round of holidays would make no sense at all. Neither would life.”

During these days of awe, we have a clear metaphor for the way that God remembers us: The book of life. And in it is written, “Who shall live and who shall die, who by fire and who by water...who by sword and who by beast...” The words of the famous litany from the Un’taneh tokef illustrate God’s powerful memory in a terrifying way. But when we pay attention to the passage immediately before this, we find a completely different metaphor.

In that verse, Un’taneh Tokef gives us this calming pastoral image:

כְּבִקְרַת רוּעָה עֶדְרוֹ מַעְבִּיר צֹאנוֹ תַּחַת שִׁבְטוֹ

*K’vakarat ro-eh ed-ro ma’avir tzono tachat shivto*

“As a shepherd seeks his flock and passes the sheep under his staff...”

כֵּן תַּעְבִּיר וְתִסְפֹּר וְתִמְנֶה וְתִפְקֹד נֶפֶשׁ כָּל חַי

*Ken ta’avir, v’tispor, v’timneh, v’ tifikod nefesh kol chai.*

“So too do You pass and count and number and note every living soul...”

The Hebrew verb “to count” in this verse is תִּסְפֹּר. And the word תַּעְבִּיר, shares the same root as the Hebrew word *sippur*, which means “story.” As we pass before God on this Day of Remembrance, God doesn’t just count us, God remembers our stories.

*“Under Your gaze, all hidden things come to light, all the many secrets buried since the Beginning. For nothing is forgotten before the throne of Your glory, and nothing is hidden from your eyes...For You bring a day decreed for*

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<sup>1</sup> Lew, Alan. This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation (pp. 10-11). Little, Brown and Company. Kindle Edition.

*remembrance to come to each spirit and soul; that Your many works shall be remembered, Your numerous, endless creations.”*<sup>2</sup> These words from a section of our Rosh Hashanah liturgy called *Zichronot*, “remembrances,” remind us of God’s omniscience—not only that God is all-knowing, but also that God is all-remembering.

Can you imagine if we were able to remember everything like God? Not just our laptops, earring backs, lunches, and groceries, but also every single thing we have ever done? Every letter we’ve ever written, every switch we’ve flipped? Every decision, every compliment, every hug? This would be completely overwhelming. What would I do with all of these memories? How would I know what was important, and what was just taking up space? Would it all just seem like a bottomless pit?

There is a story in our tradition about a pit, Joseph’s brothers famously sell him into slavery and he finds himself in the pit of Pharaoh’s prison. According to the Talmud, Rosh Hashanah is the day on which Joseph was released from this pit. So, what does Joseph’s story have to teach us about this day, Yom HaZikaron?

Joseph’s unique aptitude in his time was his ability to interpret the dreams of others. Joseph can access God’s omniscience through dreams; he can organize the confusing, jumbled pieces that a person recalls and connect them to future events. Novelist Dara Horn offers a modern take on the Joseph story in her novel, “A Guide for the Perplexed.” In the book, Horn’s main character, Josie, creates a technology that serves as an archive for the past, recorded by any of the all-seeing eyes of our electronic devices. It can order memories, sift out specific ones to view a person’s entire life, to help people feel close to a person who is far; to nearly

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<sup>2</sup> The Koren Rosh Hashanah Mahzor, Rohr Family Edition, p. 608.

resurrect the dead. The problem is, this technology enables the hoarding of memories, it is used to surveil and imprison. Remembering like God traps us in pits. As Josie discovers, “The act of reliving the past could consume the future.”<sup>3</sup>

Our memories anchor us in the past, and with memories like God’s we might be completely consumed, unable to move forward. In fact Joseph, with his dreamy access to God’s omniscience, expresses a sense of gratitude for his ability to forget. Joseph names his first born son “Menashe” meaning, “God has made me forget.” And what does Joseph forget? The Torah tells us that Joseph forgets his hardships and his past. But does Joseph really forget his past? His journey? His family? No. Famously, Joseph’s brothers come before him, completely at his mercy, and, when he could throw them in a pit, Instead, he forgives them.

Horn writes, “...We control the way we remember the past, and that’s what matters in the present. We choose what is worthy of our memory. We should probably be grateful that we can’t remember everything as God does, because if we did, we would find it impossible to forgive anyone. The limit of human memory encourages humility<sup>4</sup>.”

Un’taneh tokef reminds us that God is the only One who is all-remembering *and* all-forgiving. Who passes all of the sheep of creation under the heavenly staff,

כֵּן... תִּסְפֹּר... נֶפֶשׁ כָּל חַי

*Ken... tisor... nefesh kol chai.*

Sees them all for the individual stories that we are, loves us and forgives us.

Sometimes, forgetting is inconvenient. But ultimately, when we forget, we remember one of the essential messages of this season: that we are human, and not God. On Rosh Hashanah, our ability to forget allows us to humble

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<sup>3</sup> Horn, Dara. A Guide for the Perplexed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Kindle. p. 205.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 254.

ourselves before our all-remembering God. And to feel blessed by the knowledge that though we forget, we are never forgotten.

Shanah Tovah.