

Earlier this summer I was knocked over by a bicycle, stumbled off the curb and fractured my elbow. It left only minor long-term affects, but in the short term I faced surprising challenges. Simple tasks like twisting the top off a glass jar or sweeping with a broom became painful, if not impossible. As challenging as it was for a few weeks, having a fractured elbow forced me to do things a bit more slowly and consciously. More than this, the accident provided insight into what it must be like for so many who have some disability – physical or cognitive – of wanting to do something, but my body just not letting me. Stumbling off the sidewalk also reminded me to be more aware – to pay attention and look both ways.

Most of us probably think about memory as if it were a bit like the “search” feature on our computers. That is, if I want to recall something I just have to put in the right search parameters – say, the best gelato I ever ate – and up comes a recollection of a delicious frozen concoction in Florence. More often than not, however, I think it is more that we “stumble into memory”, thoughts and feelings coming upon us without warning, at the most unsuspected times, and knocking us for a psychic and emotional “loop”.

Many people have heard about Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who taught about the various stages of grief. In mourning, she said, we face the emotions of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These so-called “stages”, however, were just a methodology for talking about the myriad of responses to dealing with the loss of loved ones. In truth, mourning is not an easy journey from A to Z. Meghan O'Rourke, poet and author of *The Long Goodbye*, a memoir written after the death of her mother, writes that grief and mourning “don't follow a checklist; they're complicated and untidy processes, less like a progression of stages and more like an ongoing process – sometimes one that never fully ends.” There is, she suggests, a “messiness” involved with recalling loved ones.<sup>1</sup>

We “stumble into memory” at the most unlikely of moments. Walking down the street we see someone who reminds us of one we loved and, seemingly out

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<sup>1</sup> “Good Grief”, Meghan O'Rourke, *The New Yorker* (February 1, 2010)

of the blue, we just start crying. A song, a smell, a taste ... or, maybe, nothing at all happens ... and suddenly the memory of those who were in our lives floods back. It comes unawares, overwhelms and then fades, waiting for the next unguarded moment to reappear.

In contrast to proceeding stage by stage, then, memory is more like being in the waves at the beach. At first, when we go into the water we are buffeted about. It's hard to find our balance. After awhile, we get into the rhythm of the ebb and flow, and we can stand. "Ah," we say to ourselves, "Now I've got it under control." Then, without warning, along comes an unexpectedly large wave, and we are suddenly tossed and turned uncontrollably. Like the waves at the shore, grief and memory have a pattern all their own.

The newly published novel by Dara Horn, *A Guide for the Perplexed* weaves together the stories of three people in different eras. The first is about a contemporary software developer named Josie Ashkenazi, who creates a program called "Genizah" that uses technology to preserve users' memories. Josie goes missing on a trip to Egypt and is stranded in a Cairo prison, presumed dead after a grisly video of her abduction is released. In the second, 19<sup>th</sup> century Cambridge professor Solomon Schechter stumbles upon the original *geniza* (or "storage room" for sacred texts) during a research expedition to Egypt. Both Josie and Schechter link to the third plot strand, about medieval physician and religious scholar Maimonides (some of whose letters were found in the *geniza*), who sends his brother on an ill-fated journey to track down a medication. The book, which shares a title with Maimonides' great philosophical text, is a meditation on memory and a literary exposition on the interlocking strands of Jewish history, the past speaking to the present. "Nothing ever really disappears," Josie observes, "even when you want it to."

If, indeed, we "stumble into memory" so unconsciously, and nothing ever truly disappears, why then *Yizkor's* ritualized remembrance? Perhaps it is because as strong as is the human capacity for remembering is our ability to forget. In some ways, forgetfulness is an emotional defense. If we did not wipe away recollection of every slight or hurt we might not find it within ourselves to

forgive. Too much memory gets in the way of living. We need to forget – at least a little – in order to make room for living more fully in the present, and create space for hope in the future. The helpful ability to selectively forget, however, can turn into a moral amnesia.

Yom Kippur is the culmination, after all, of a long period of self-reflection and personal accounting for one's wrongs. We are *supposed* to remember those we hurt, what we did wrong, where we might have acted but stayed silent, how we betrayed others and lied to ourselves. Only through recognition of our failings, the Rambam taught, can we begin the process of apology, reconciliation and forgiveness. When memory serves the goal of leading us to being better, therefore, it is redemptive. If that is true for individuals, it is no less true for nations. Ignoring the past – or denying culpability for what one did – leads us to question if anything has really changed. Acceptance of responsibility, reparations and apology are national means for achieving reconciliation.

Jewish life is, then, a balance between forgetting and remembering. On the one hand, when we say a prayer just for being alive (שחינו), for our very existence (וקיימנו) and for “being in the moment” (והגיענו לאמן הזה), we are not ignoring what was, we simply affirm that present joy trumps bitterness over the past. On the other hand, in the face of forgetfulness, our traditions push us to ritual moments of communal remembering. At Pesach we recall our oppression as slaves. We are enjoined to “remember Amalek”, the one who sought our destruction. Five times a year – including *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur – we are supposed to remember our deceased loved ones. Time and again, we are forced to “stumble” into memory.

As painful as it sometimes is to recall the past, there is something necessary about it, too. In the early 1990s a German artist, Guenther Demnig, was looking for a way to remind those who lived in Germany that the victims of Nazi persecution were integrally part of German society. He came up with the idea of placing small, square brass bricks, each one inscribed with the name — and details about the death of — people who once lived where others now had their home. It begin with just a handful of such commemorative stones. Today,

there are more than 30,000 of them in dozens of cities and towns across Germany, and the idea has spread to Hungary, Italy, even Russia. The plaques, right at the entrance to a home or apartment, are called *Stolpersteine* – literally “stumbling stones.” Unlike museums or large, public memorials, the *Stolpersteine* are inherently intimate. “Suddenly they are there”, says Demnig, “right outside your front door, at your feet, in front of you.” Like a memory that forces itself in unannounced, these “stumbling stones” force those who walk over them: “do not forget. Remember.” Most of the *Stolpersteine* have written on them “Hier wonhte” (“here lived”) – a reminder that it was not 6 million who died, a mind-numbing multitude. It was *this* man, *this* woman, *this* child. The memory does bring pain, but it also restores dignity to those who lived. It says that something worthy endures.

*Yizkor* is a ritualized *Stolperstein* – an obstacle in the way of forgetfulness, a wave to knock us from our complacency. Memories of loved ones come to us unanticipated. Over time, however, they come less often, generally with less intensity. It is at such moments that we need *Yizkor*, to helps us “stumble into memory” – to recall our loved ones at their best, to forgive them for their failings, to remember that we have the capacity to regain our balance and build rich lives. At *Yizkor* we stop and say, “Here lived” ... and, in truth, because we remember them ... they live still.

There is a time for everything  
And a season for every purpose ...  
A time to be born and a time to die ...  
A time to mourn and time to dance,  
A time to scatter stones and a time to place them ...

Memory knows its own cadence. It comes whether we seek it or not. There are times we need to find ways to leave memory's aside so that we might live more fully, forgive with a whole heart and turn from our pain. But forgetfulness is no less powerful. It dulls us from feeling the anguish of others. It steals the goodness of those who went before. And so, as the antidote to forgetting we give ourselves the gift of *Yizkor* – stumbling, with head and heart, into sacred memory.