

Just a few days ago Anne, my wife, asked me about a delicious cake someone made me about 20 years ago. "Don't you remember it?" "No," I said, "Not at all." It seems I'm having that same conversation a lot lately.

It reminds me of a story of a group of friends who liked to get together for their birthdays. When they all turned 50, they discussed where to meet for dinner. They decided on the Ocean View restaurant because the servers there were so good looking. Ten years later, at 60 years of age, the friends once again agreed to meet at the Ocean View because the food and wine was delicious. At 70 years of age, the group once again settled on the Ocean View because it had a beautiful view – and they could eat in peace. Ten years later, the friends once again chose to go to the Ocean View, because it had an elevator and was wheel chair accessible. At 90 years of age, grateful for having lived so long and being together, the group again discussed where to go. After much conversation the friends agreed to meet at the Ocean View restaurant ... because they had never been there before.

I've been thinking a lot about what we hope to remember and what we want to forget ever since the protests in Charlottesville a month of so ago. After the Holocaust, following the threat of Egypt's Nasser in 1967 to toss Israelis into the sea, we Jews in America stiffened our backs and affirmed with clear resolve, "Never again." We vowed to remember in order to never forget. But after Charlottesville, when hundreds gathered with torches shouting, "Jews will not replace us! Jews will not replace us," we would be foolish to be so certain. "Never Again!" as a defiant rallying cry has suddenly become a worrisome, "Never Again?" – punctuated by a question mark as the niggling thought arises in the recesses of our minds: Are we safe? Could the old hate come again?

The catalyst for all the protests and counter-protests in Charlottesville, you may recall, was that city's plan to take down a statue of Robert E.

Lee. Many claim that Confederate statues represent a shameful part of our country's past and should be removed. Others defend them as part of our nation's legacy, including our President, who said it was "sad to see the history and culture of our great country being ripped apart with the removal of our beautiful statues and monuments."

America is struggling with the tension between remembering our past and trying to run from it. But this is an age-old struggle for us as Jews. In fact, the controversy over Confederate monuments touches on themes central to Yom Kippur. What do we seek to remember and what do we try to forget? What do we recall with delight; what recollections do we want to hide or expunge? And ... when we turn from the wrongs we've done, which is better – to continually come back to them or to leave them behind as dead weights that keep us from living fully in the present?

In the Bible *Kohelet* wrote, "There is a time for every purpose ... A time to kill and a time to heal. *ועת לבנות* and a time to build up."¹ When is it that we ought to enshrine our memories? When should we allow them to disappear, forgetting a "gift" that allows the pain to recede?

The Talmud relates a fascinating conversation between God and Israel that focuses on these very questions. It centers on the very first national monument our people ever built – the Golden Calf.

The rabbis relate that God once reassuringly said to Israel, "A mother may forget her child, but I will never forget you. I can't forget all the offerings you gave me in your wandering in the wilderness."

Knowing that this blessing could also be a curse, Israel responded, "So, does that mean you won't forget the Golden Calf?"

God replied, "*That* I'll forget."

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:3

But, Israel retorted (and, we can imagine – with a bit of trepidation), “Since you chose to forget when we spurned you, maybe You will forget the bonds we made at Sinai?!”

Then, with words of comfort God offers a final reassurance, I (the “I” who said, ‘I am Your God’) will never forget you.”²

In this imagined narrative our sages address a deep problem of faith and forgiveness. If God remembers what we did that was good, would that not then logically imply that God takes note of all our transgressions? And if God remembers us at our worst, how can we feel worthy, capable and still be able to have a relationship?

This interchange in the Talmud is not, of course, about God. Our sages are really teaching us about our relationships with one another, about how and what we seek to remember and what we chose to forget.

On the one hand, memory is a gift. Only with the fullness of self-reflection and honest self-appraisal is it possible to accept responsibility – to say, “I admit that this is where I erred”. Memory, therefore, is the first step towards forgiveness. More than this, memory can be a source of reassurance. It allows us to recall the good of those who came before and to draw on all they bequeath us. Just as it is important for us as individuals to remember so it is for nations. Many countries that emerged from an authoritarian past, from Nazi Germany to Pinochet’s Chile to South Africa after apartheid, recognized – as did the philosopher Santayana – “that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” National healing, just as in us, can only come through a fully honest remembering of triumphs and failures.

On the other hand, too much remembering can get in the way of living fully and happily. There’s a cartoon that ran in *The New Yorker* a few years ago that plays on this theme. Several people are at a wake

² Babylonian Talmud, *B'rachot* 32b

standing around the coffin and looking at the face of the deceased. One of them says, "I don't want to remember her like this. I want to remember her for the mean thing she said to me in 1981!" Many carry their memories of wrongs done to us like some badge of honor. "She said something so hurtful." "He forgot me when I needed him most." "She should have reached out, but she didn't." "How can I ever have a relationship with them knowing who they voted for." Carry too many memories of betrayals and failures and you are debilitated, unable to really forgive and be forgiven, to leave the past aside and live more fully right now.

תשובה *Teshuvah*, the ability to turn towards something better involves a fine balance, then, between remembering and forgetting. And that is why our sages tell the story I related earlier. Like God with Israel, they imply it is good to remember who we can be at our best and most noble. At the same time we need to recall our transgressions – enough to avoid the wrong again, but not so much that we sink into despair or are burdened by guilt. We remember and forget, then, with a purpose – to erect deeper, holier and more satisfying relationships.

All of this brings us back to the memorial to Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville – and the many other memorials to leaders of the Confederacy throughout our country. Are they representative of a time we should forget or remember? When is it right to erect a memorial? When should they come down?

As we struggle with this we have to be honest enough to say that most of us cannot fully know what it must feel like for those whose ancestors were enslaved for hundreds of years to see such statues. But as Jews we can empathize. In college I had a friend of Ukrainian background. I recall the pit in my stomach when I visited his parents' home and saw a calendar with a picture of the great Ukrainian Cossack Bogdan Chmielnitski. Did my friend not realize that his parents' hero led a pogrom

against the Jews in the mid-17th century, killing over 100,000 Jews – the worst act of anti-Semitic genocide until the Holocaust? Similarly, how would you respond to a statue to Erwin Rommel – not the architect of the *Shoah*, but who, like Robert E. Lee engaged in actions that propped up a morally corrupt system? Few of us here are the descendants of America's slaves, but the Jewish community is – physically and/or spiritually – defined by our own experience of slavery. "Once we were slaves," we say at the Pesach seder, "Now we are free."

Interestingly, for all the statues we have in this country, in Israel there are remarkably few. In fact, I could not recall ever seeing a statue there, so I went on line to try to find some. And, you know, there aren't many. OK, there's a bust of Albert Einstein at Tel Aviv University and in some out of the way place there's a statue of the writer Shalom Aleichem on a goat (ask me about that some time), but that's pretty much it. Unlike so many other nations, where founders of the country, great generals or political leaders are acclaimed in bronze or stone, in Israel there are none.

Perhaps it's because of the commandment not to make a "graven" or "sculpted image"? Or, maybe there is an even deeper aversion in our traditions and culture to statue building that relates to why we Jews don't like placing any person on a pedestal. A memorial or sculpture conveys the message that this person is worthy of honor, a role model for society. The general thrust of Jewish thought, however, is that while there are righteous, saintly and good people, no one is without sin. Again and again we recite today, על חטא חטאנו *Al chet shetanu* "for the sins we (all of us) have sinned." No one is without fault. No wonder we Jews tend to be culturally allergic to statues.

But living here in America we cannot avoid them. So, what do we do? Is this a time for "tearing down" or "building up"? Of course, this is not just a tension in our national life. Each of us faces this challenge. Yom Kippur is

the day for humbly facing our past. What am I sorry that I said or did? What do I wish I could forget? How do I selectively choose to remember when I was selfless and kind, but forget when I was petty, selfish or unforgiving? And so we seek atonement, to remember just enough to seek to be honest, but not so much be straitjacketed by our past wrongs.

I once heard someone quip, "I forgive and forget, because I have a good heart and a terrible memory." But we do remember. The question is – for us as individuals, as a Jewish people and in our country – what to remember and to what end?

Our sages debated whether Yom Kippur is a kind of spiritual "re-boot" or not. One position is that once we atone the past is put aside, and with this break we can start afresh with a clean slate.³ Others, however, claim that atonement can never erase the past. Rather, when we ask for forgiveness we carry some shame for what we did wrong in order to remind us to do better.⁴

It would be nice to say forgiveness is a clean break. For most of us, however, the truth is closer to the second position – that atonement does not stand in isolation, but carry our past with us. When Moses sees the people worshipping the Golden Calf, many are aware that he smashes (or drops) the tablets. But what does he do with the calf? He "burned it in the fire. Then he ground it to a powder, scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it."⁵ In the most graphic way possible, then, Moses says to the people – when you build false gods, you may destroy them – indeed, you should – but don't think that the sin of the desire to follow them will disappear. Moses (as I suggested last night) gives the people a second chance, but it is not wiping the slate clean.

³ In a debate about the sin offering made by the High Priest Aaron, Rabbi Yochanan, in the Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 2a, says this offering allows for a completely fresh start.

⁴ In the Sifra, *Miluim* 15 (manuscript Vatican v66), the sin offering relates related to the way funds were collected to build the Tabernacle, in that "the people of Israel put pressure on one another and people did not really contribute so willingly."

⁵ Exodus 32:20

Like those with a drinking problem who, even after many years being sober, still claim to be alcoholics, each of us carries with us relics of the past we might like to forget, but probably should not. We hurt others – sometimes those closest to us. We distance us from our faith and God. We betray the best in ourselves. Yom Kippur urges us to knock down the walls that separate us from others and smash the shrines of our ego. But even when we do, something of them remains within us – and so we must erect new and worthy testaments, built by trust, integrity, selflessness and kindness. “There is a time to tear down and a time to build up.”

Given all this I agree, in part, with our President that the Confederate memorials are a part of our history and culture. But they are far from (as he claimed) “beautiful”. They are symbols of our great national sin – the mark we all bear, and which continues to define our national debate about race and discrimination. Someday, I hope, our country’s Confederate monuments will be put in museums with bronze plaques: “Here is what we used to be.” But we are not yet there. Thus, while many of you may feel differently, I am not in favor of taking all the Civil War statues down – at least, not quite yet. If we were to start from scratch, perhaps the Jewish wisdom of erecting no statues would be best. But we do have a past, and America’s national atonement, no less than our personal turning, is grounded in who we really are, not some perfect ideal of what we could be.

Leaving up the statues of Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee, however, is not enough – because they tell only part of the story.

How, then, to balance remembering and forgetting? I discovered the answer several years ago in Berlin. In the very heart of that city there is a massive Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. But that is not the monument that moved me the most. Rather, there were three others, each much more low-key. The first are numerous 4-inch square bronze

plaques placed throughout the city. On each is the name of a Jewish family who once lived there before being forced to leave or taken to their deaths. They are called *stolpersteine*, "stumbling stones", an almost unnoticed, but ever-present reminder of how evil became normalized. The second is in a district where Jews once lived. All throughout the area there are 80 signs, each with a picture on one side and, on the other, one of the hundreds of Nazi laws and rules that gradually dehumanized Berlin's Jewish population. In front of a sweet shop is a sign with candy on one side, and on the reverse the words: "Jews and Poles are not allowed to buy sweets." In front of one U-Bahn (Berlin's underground) is the symbol of the municipal subway. On the other side are the words, "Jews cannot use the trains." On a lamppost is a picture of a cat. On the back, "Jews are not allowed to have pets." The last monument is next to a train station in a leafy suburb. Along the tracks are metal markers. Each carries the date a train left that station - with the numbers of Jews deported. So many on this date, so many on that one; 50,000 in total who left that upscale neighborhood for the crematoria and the pits.

These are the kind of memorials we ought to be erecting here. Not just monuments to the generals who fought to maintain a system our country fought a war to overthrow, but statues to remember generations of slaves shackled and oppressed. We don't need fewer memorials. We need more. In every square where human beings were treated as chattel, in the heart of our cities where blacks were denied their freedom - we need statues of the nooses around the necks of thousands who were lynched, murdered without trial. We ought to put up highways markers to recall those who escaped, but to remember the places where they were shamefully handed back into slavery. We should name libraries and public institutions for those righteous souls who hid slaves in safe houses to help them escape to Canada and to freedom.

In conclusion, if we want forgiveness as individuals, we must face the fullness of our lives – remembering the good and the unworthy. If we want atonement as a nation, we need to be just as honest about the “history and culture of our great country.” Yom Kippur urges us: remember! Not in part, but wholly and fully – the noble and the ugly, the bitter and the sweet. Memory is the key to atonement; forgetting, the key to forgiveness.

Let us remember, as individuals and as a society, what we should. Let us forget what we must.

And then ... atonement will be made.

And then ... we will we be forgiven.