

Do, Lord, Remember Me
Erev Rosh HaShanah 5777
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Many people like to sing in the shower. That is probably the one place where I NEVER sing. When I'm in the shower I think. Sometimes, memories or moments, faces of old friends, a song, or an idea will just pop into my head. A few weeks ago, a song that I've not heard since childhood suddenly began to echo inside my mind. When I was a kid, I would often go to church with my friends, and I always enjoyed learning the songs that would be sung. It was one of those songs that out of the blue I began to hum... [Hum melody then sing.] Do, Lord, oh, do Lord, oh, do remember me... Do, Lord, oh, do Lord, oh, do remember me... Do, Lord, oh, do Lord, oh, do remember me... Look away beyond the blue. It's an old spiritual that was recorded by Johnny Cash. The other verses that I learned are not applicable for us, but that first verse – it certainly is, especially on this day, this day of memory upon which we remember our deeds and we ask God to remember them as well.

Tonight we have ushered in Rosh Hashanah, literally, the head of the year. This day is also known by four other names, each giving a different insight into the themes of this joyous, yet somber and introspective day. Tomorrow morning we will recite the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, a central part of our liturgy, and for many of us, the most fearsome and breathtaking moment of these Days of Awe. We will read "*Hinei yom ha-din, lifkod al tz'va*

marom ba-din.” Behold, this is the Day of Judgment, for even the Hosts of Heaven are judged. *Yom ha-Din...* Rosh Hashanah is also the Day of Judgment.

We, God’s sheep, pass beneath the staff of God, our shepherd. Who shall live and who shall die? On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed. This is the Day of Judgment. *Hinei yom ha-din...*

Later tomorrow, after we sound the shofar, we will see the words “*Ha-Yom Harat Olam.*” This is the day of the World’s Birth. Today all creatures of the world stand in judgment – whether as children or as servants. If as children, be merciful with us as the mercy of a father for children. If as servants, our eyes depend upon You, until You will be gracious to us and release our verdict as light, O Awesome and Holy One.” A reminder that God treats us with mercy as with a child, yet rules over us as over a servant. But why the day of the birth of the world, or more literally its conception? While throughout the *machzor*, our High Holy Day prayerbook, we will refer to God as Ha-Melech and Avinu Malkeinu, calling on the strong, powerful, masculine aspects of God, these are also the days on which we will repeatedly call out God’s attributes, beginning with “Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v’chanun,” relating to God as the source of *rachamim*, of compassion, the eternal *rechem* or womb from which the world came and continually comes forth. And interestingly, tomorrow we will read of the story of Isaac, the birth of whom was prayed for and longed for, and of the travails of Hannah who prayed desperately with silent lips to give birth to a child.

While the story of Hannah is feasible, perhaps the story of Sarah is more metaphorical. Sarah's miraculous ability to conceive teaches us that no matter how we see ourselves, as long as we are alive, we possess the ability to bring new creations into the world. Rosh Hashanah is a day when conception is much broader than the ability to produce children. This day is one of infinite possibilities where each one of us becomes a vessel for bringing into being that which we most yearn for. *Ha-yom Harat Olam...*

You will hear in a while the chanting of the special Kiddush (the KIDD-ish) for Rosh Hashanah, the words of which help us to consecrate this holy day with wine. In the text you will hear two more of the names for this day, and the music illustrates their meaning. *Yom T'ruah* is one of them – the Day of the Sounding of the Shofar as taught to us in the Torah. Both Leviticus and Numbers instruct us to hold a sacred day on the first day of the seventh month, on which we shall sound the shofar.

Bachodesh ha-sh'vi'i b'echad lachodesh y'hiyeh lachem shabbaton, zichron t'ruah mikra kodesh. 'On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of sabbath rest, commemorated with (or remembered with) *t'ruah*, a holy occasion for you. *T'ruah* can mean a blast of the shofar or it can mean a shout. When we sound *t'ruah* on the shofar, those nine quick tones in succession, it sounds like a shout: Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey! Wake up!

When we arrive at the end of the Kiddush, we will say “*Baruch Atah Adonai, melech al kol ha-aretz m’kadeish Yisrael v’Yom HaZikaron.*” *Zikaron... Zichron t’ruah... Zachor... Zeicher litziat Mitzrayim... Yizkor...* They all have a common meaning – memory, remembrance. *Yom haZikaron* is the Day of Remembrance. On Rosh Hashanah, tradition teaches, God remembers our deeds for the past year. The chief metaphor employed is the Book of Life, in which our deeds are written by virtue of our words and behavior, and which stands in witness for or against us at this time of year. We are called upon to look back and remember what we have said and done, to repent for that which was wrong, and to make amends for our transgressions by doing *t’shuvah*. So *Yom HaZikaron* is meant to inspire us to remember the year that has passed because it is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve *t’shuvah* or repentance without first taking a moment to recall all that has happened and all that we’ve done, both the positive and negative, the good choices that we have made and the bad ones as well.

There is even an entire section in the shofar service dedicated to remembering. It’s called *Zichronot*, or rememberings, you could say. Traditionally, ten verses from the Torah are read, all of which contain the word “remembrance.” These verses are meant to be used as a reminder to us and to God of all the times God promised to remember our ancestors and the promise God made that we would be forgiven for our sins, making the task of *t’shuvah* more attainable for each of us. And, of course, we are all

familiar with the *Yizkor* service that will take place on Yom Kippur, our memorial service for recalling our departed loved ones.

As you can tell, Judaism is concerned—or some would say obsessed—with memory. Collective memory has been, often by necessity, the lifeblood of our people since biblical times. We have even had a group of professional memorizers who preserved and passed on our religion orally from generation to generation. The writer Jonathan Safran Foer said, “Jews have six senses: touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing... and memory.”

There isn't a word for “history” in Hebrew, but there are plenty of words for memory, *zichron*, which comes from *zachor*—to remember, a word that resonates strongly with us and is almost a part of our psyche as Jews. “*Zachor*” appears in the Bible over 150 times. The Ten Commandments include “Remember (*zachor!*) the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” Moses says to the Israelites, “Remember (*zachor!*) the days, consider the years of ages past...” The Shabbat before Purim is called Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of Remembrance. And perhaps the most prevalent and memorable of all: *Remember* that you were slaves in Egypt...

And this day, Rosh Hashanah, is the least historical of any Jewish holiday, but we still call it *Yom HaZikaron*—the Day of Remembrance. Without an historical event associated with it, what exactly are we remembering? On this most meditative and reflective of days, memory plays a critical role in our self-assessment. But recalling the past is not dealing with history in Judaism—it's dealing with memory.

Of course, there can be no present or future without a past. And often, these three are totally interchangeable in Jewish life. Chronology is not always important. Each time we repeat a ritual or recite one of our stories at Chanukah or Pesach, we're reliving an event from the past. In Jewish history, we can cross the Red Sea only once, and we can redeem the Temple from the Greeks only once, and our community can stand at the base of Mount Sinai only once. But all the generations to come need the memory so that the event can live again.

We were not physically there at Sinai, but we are commanded to see ourselves as if we had been. God says, "I make this covenant... not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here...and also with those who are not with us here this day." The story is that all Jewish souls stood at the base of Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. We all "remember" it.

This idea of memory is especially important for those of us who are Jews by choice. We understand that we have a Jewish future, but we worry about our lack of a Jewish past. We can, though, have a Jewish memory. According to tradition, we were all there at Sinai, so the emergence from the mikveh as a new Jew is like the Sinai experience. It becomes a memory of being there with every Jewish soul before us, almost like a recovered memory.

And think about the Passover story. We read the Haggadah every year, our book of stories and remembrances. Each year we relive the stories

through the collective memory of our people. This is the one quintessential memory that we pass down from generation to generation. And we're not just remembering, we're bringing the story to life and reliving it ourselves. Our memory transforms a story into something with purpose, meaning, and a future. Each of us is mandated to regard the Exodus as a personal experience. This reinforces the fusion between past and present. Remember, the wicked child in the Haggadah is described as wicked because he does *not* see himself as one that came out of Egypt. He doesn't remember it. He severs that sacred tie.

So we are given the imperative: "You shall not oppress a stranger for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt." I am commanded to remember something as part of the collective that didn't happen to me personally. I am commanded as part of the Jewish community to act on behalf of the enslaved precisely because I know what it's like to be oppressed. We must not only remember, but act on this memory. We must learn from our memories and remember to be kind and caring and fair. This way, knowledge of the past becomes a moral responsibility. It conditions us to make better, kinder choices in the future...and thus to make t'shuvah – to return to that essence, that moral goodness that makes us Jews.

And so memory can strengthen our personal ethics, and our personal ethics can strengthen the world. As Jews we have a repository of thousands of years' worth of experience and knowledge.

We can study ancient texts that guide us and we can learn from the collective memory of our people and from our teachers how to be in the world, how to act and react and find meaning. The Baal Shem Tov said that “in remembrance lies the secret of redemption.”

Tonight begins *Yom ha-Zikaron* – the Day of Remembrance—for us as a community and for us as individuals. As a group, we have been shaped by the collective memories of our people’s milestones and tragedies. And as individuals we must reflect on our own personal realities, stories, words, and deeds. What new challenges did we face? How did we respond to them? Can we feel proud of the things we accomplished or are we ashamed at our behavior towards others? Can we learn from the past, from our remembering, in order to take action for a better future? We pray in the Amidah: *Zochreinu l’chayim, melech chafetz bachayim*...Remember us unto life, O Sovereign who delights in life. Do, Lord, O, Do Lord, O do remember me. Let my memories of the past lead me to goodness, life, and peace in the future.

Kein y’hi ratzon. May it be so.