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ASBI Congregation
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Rote Memorization

Professor Hyim Soloveitchik is one of the most prominent historians of Medieval Jewish History, and the two graduate level courses I took with him at Yeshiva University were perhaps the most intimidating classroom experiences of my life. I vividly remember him explaining to us, early in the semester of the first course I took with him, as he explained his expectations of what we had to know, “if you don’t know names and dates, what do you know?” He may have been deliberately counter-cultural when he said that because most of my formal education up until that moment had deemphasized memorization, or what they called “rote memorization” in place of more analytical forms of knowledge.

Parashat Ha'azinu is meant to be memorized. The core of the parashah is a beautiful poem, a perfect example of Biblical poetic couplets where a phrase is repeated in different words meaning the same, or nearly the same thing:

הָאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֲדַבְרָה {ס} וְתִשְׁמַע הָאָרֶץ אִמְרֵי־פִי:

Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!

The second half is a recapitulation of the first half of the verse and so it goes, verse after verse.

Why is this poem, and several others, incorporated into the Torah? The prose narrative of the Torah is certainly rich and beautiful language. Indeed, halakhically, all of the Torah is considered a poem or a song, such that the verse (at the end of last week’s parasha): וְעַתָּה כְּתֹבוּ לָכֶם אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת - now write for yourselves this “shirah” is understood to be a mitzvah to write the entire Torah.

On other occasions we have discussed various reasons why the entire Torah can be understood to be a shirah / poem / song. But Ha'azinu is certainly a poem. Rashi says that וְעַתָּה כְּתֹבוּ לָכֶם אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת is a reference, not to the entire Torah, but to the poem at the heart of Parashat Ha'azinu. And when the Torah then says, וְלִמְדָהּ אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁמְרָהּ בְּפִיהֶם, that means that this poem, Ha'azinu, is meant to be memorized. As Ibn Ezra says: שִׁדְעוֹ בְּגֵרָסָא - it should be something that can be recited.

Based on this, many schools teach children to memorize Ha'azinu. I have never attended such a school, so I don't know Ha'azinu by heart but I do think it's worth while to contemplate the value of something being memorized. Memorization entails selecting certain knowledge and internalizing it to such a degree that it lodges in our hearts and can emerge on demand. And so, while I did not ever memorize Ha'azinu, there were song lyrics I memorized in elementary school because I wanted to be able to sing those songs at a time of my choosing without recourse to any tools. Before the Internet, some of you remember, the tools for learning song lyrics were liner notes, if you were lucky.

And even in an Internet age, where song lyrics can be summoned in seconds, one still has to know how to search for the song. Who is the artist who wrote the lyrics or recorded the song? What is the title? Are there any distinctive lyrics that would yield an accurate google search? Knowing how to find information is itself a form of knowledge. Ultimately the distinction between wisdom and judgement and intelligence and memorization breaks down.

Memorization is a choice. Memorization is a commitment to knowing something well enough to take possession of that knowledge and merge it into oneself until that knowledge is a part of you forever.

What will you commit to memory this year? What knowledge do you want to absorb into your mind and into your heart? What will you review and review again and reinforce?

It could be Torah content? Do you know Ha'azinu by heart? That sounds like a cool thing to do since Moshe Rabbenu told us to do it! Do you remember how to leyn your bar mitzvah parashah or bat mitzvah parashah? Did you never learn? Would you like to learn how?

Are there behaviors that you can "memorize" by internalizing them until they have been committed to our muscle memory and have become habits. Waking up for Shacharit at the start of the day. Learning daf yomi. Reciting berakhot before and after everything you eat. Singing Zemirot at Shabbat meals. Volunteering to bring meals through the Hessed Committee..

There are also negative behaviors that are memorized: responding in anger to a provocative statement or responding defensively to criticism. Listening to and accepting and believing lashon harah - some malicious information about someone else that we have no reason to know.

Instead of choosing behaviors to learn in a capricious or half-hazard way. Can we act with deliberation and forethought?

The rapid transition from Yom Kippur to Sukkot allows us to emerge from the cleansing purification of Yom Kippur and immediately involve ourselves in mitzvot that occupy our hands and envelope our entire bodies. But this doesn't only happen in the sukkah. We can use this time of year to harness the inspiration of the yamim ha'nora'im and the powerful moments we experienced together, to decide in a deliberate way to live with more intention and more focus and more direction...and more memorization.