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### The Death of Memory: A Second Loss

I don't know precisely on which day things changed, the day that I moved from remembering him daily, automatically, without fail, to remembering him occasionally. It was, in a sense, a second loss. Less shocking, certainly less powerful than the first: the loss of the body, the person, the daily possibility for contact. But this second loss, the loss of memory, the loss of his being constantly in my thoughts, was still painful.

As with the death of my father, the death of my memories of him and of his death, stirred new feelings of guilt. The first time I forgot to buy the yizkor candle. The first time that I couldn't remember exactly which day my father died... and then having to ask my mother. Was it May 17th or May 19th?

I felt guilty for this loss of memory for it signified the breaking of vows, the vows I had made to always remember. *Eileh ezk'rah*: I will remember these things I told myself as I stood in the Beth Israel hospital. I will remember how I feel right now, how this place looks. The sound of the breathing machine. How you look: so small, bald, clean. Innocent. I will remember you, Dad.

The loss of memory: a betrayal of the dead, a betrayal of the self.

It turns out that the images are not seared into my memory after all. I do recall being scared of exactly this: scared of forgetting what happened and how it happened. The minutiae of the crisis took on such sanctity and I thought, at the time, that through the endless repetition, through the constant explaining in the days leading up to and after May 17th, telling how my father's life was ending and how I felt about it, that I would never forget. It was so important then, to get the details right, to tell the story very precisely even as I was living it. I've never been so full of language as when I was explaining the permutations of the crisis: such a clear, straight connection between my thoughts and my lips.

Yet even then, it turns out, I was trying to forget what was going on. I wanted to stop talking and to start feeling. And I only know this because I wrote it down the day after my father died. "It is of course beyond an intellectual puzzle," I wrote. "The pieces can't fit. I want to move past the point of keeping track of the pieces." This entry from my journal of that period describes a desire to forget. Yet the journal itself serves as evidence of my fear of forgetting. I wanted to be able to remember the desire to forget.

And now my journal functions as a trigger to memory: this is its role. No doubt the loss of these painful images, their sustained absence from my consciousness and the sub-consciousness of dreams is a sign of healing, of no longer being traumatized by my father's death. But when these images faded, so too did the sense of his daily presence sustained through the almost constant remembrance of his life. Now I rely on certain triggers such as my journal to remember.

Most often we have accidental encounters with our memories of our loved ones that are spurred by sights, smells and tastes. It is these encounters with an eclectic range of objects and images—often in the most mundane moments—that somehow manage to capture perfectly the essence of those who have died and of our particular relationship to them.

I remember my father when I eat cottage cheese, or pumpernickel bread; I wear a Brooks Brothers sweater, or listen to Stravinsky's Rite of Spring. When I play a Steinway piano; it's the Fourth of July, and sometimes when I look at my hands while I drive: for I have my father's hands, and I hold the steering wheel as he did.

I have my father's hands: perhaps we make recompense for our loss of memory by growing into that person, by hearing his voice in my mouth. Our memories of the dead are triggered by the sound of our own voices. We, our very selves, become pathways to memory. This can be unsettling: "Oh no, I sound just like my father." The moment feels like a reproach of him and me, for I often hear his voice most clearly emerging from my mouth when I am angry. And I don't want to sound like him then; I didn't like how he sounded when he was angry. But I learn from this memory of him. I hear his voice too in more subtle ways, sometimes when I sing, or when I write. We may grow into our parents, but there are aspects of this inheritance that we may change. We have the opportunity to keep learning from those who have died.

These next moments are set aside for the reclamation of memory. Generally, our remembering occurs in private, unforeseen moments. But then there are days like this one, in which time is formally set aside for the perusal of memory. Ironically, it is in these special, dedicated moments that sometimes it becomes hardest to remember. Here in our outdoor chapel, we sit surrounded by so many others. We are separated from the sacred objects that so reliably provoke memories—Dad's favorite jacket, the picture of mom lifting you up as an infant. We do have our bodies and our voices—these unique, evolving depositories of past relationships—yet we are distracted. We are hungry. For many of us this reclamation takes effort and focus.

The notion of concentration is encoded in a Hebrew word for memory: *zecher*. If you reverse the letters—*zion, kaf, reish*—you arrive at the Hebrew word for concentrate, or concentration: *rakeiz* or *rikuz*. Sometimes remembering takes a deliberate act. Turn these moments into a sustained encounter with the past. Push into the forefront of your consciousness images and memories of your loved ones.

*Rakzu*: Concentrate.

*Zichru*: Remember!