

Remembrance of Things Past-- -for the Present and the Future How quickly the clarity of vision and the feeling of a moment fades, recedes and is obscured by the passage of time. Our memory plays tricks, gives us momentary hints and then resigns in frustration; a realization that "no, it really wasn't like that at all." And yet, we strive to remember-- -to remain connected to those people and those events that shaped us. Marcel Proust's masterpiece "Remembrance of Things Past" struggles with this phenomenon as do we all.

On a recent trip to the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., I was captivated by Mark Bradford's extraordinary painting "Pickett's Charge." It is based on the famous "Cyclorama" by the French artist Paul Philippoteaux. The original depicts Pickett's Charge on the Union forces at the battle of Gettysburg, July 3, 1863 and it can still be seen at the Gettysburg Museum. The painting is an enormous work in the round, 42 feet high and 377 feet long. Like most others who have seen the painting, I was moved by the graphic detail of the Americans, Union and Confederate, their horses, the field, the loss, the brutality, the death that ushered in the endgame of this nation's most horrific war. Indeed, Civil War veterans, hardened by war, were said to have wept when they saw this Cyclorama. So do many of us today.

But Bradford's work in D.C. plays on that experience. It obscures it, teases it, loses it, and briefly recovers glimpses of it. He reproduces the original and then overlays it with cloth, canvas, rope and paint. Briefly, one glimpses the original and then it is overwhelmed by color and texture. Bradford's work challenges us: if we fail to remember, our past is lost. By failing to remember, we lose our bearing, our roots, our heritage. Wisdom hard earned now forgotten.

The mitzvah of Passover is L'hagid, to tell the story of our ancestors' miraculous redemption from slavery to freedom. For thousands of years Jews have gathered with family and friends to tell our story, to read the Haggadah, literally "The Story." Yes, we tell the story of our ancestors but we are also instructed to relate personally to the story--- as if we were personally there, freed from the humiliation and oppression of slavery, redeemed by God's will, led by Moses across the Sea and toward the Promised Land, the Land of Israel.

Over time the story can lose focus. The effort it takes to imagine oneself personally involved a bit too much. Who has the time? Besides, did it really happen? And even if the answer is yes, does it still matter? Contemporary concerns and attitudes push past the past, lays layers of new issues on top, paints coats of new images which are soon replaced by even newer images, color upon color until the pigment darkens to black. And all is obscured. And nothing is remembered. And nothing has meaning. And no one shows up. And we lose all feeling and connection and settle for a mere remembrance of things past and lost.

Our Jewish traditions, Festivals and Sabbaths, High Holy Days and Yizkor, Torah and Israel and, oh yes, God, these are the fabric of our being. These are what kept our people alive. These are what have uplifted our people beyond the oppression of bigots and anti-Semites so that our people could achieve the heights of culture, education, prosperity and humanity. These are what inspired all of humanity-- -for the Jewish contribution to humanity is equaled by none. This is our pride and our glory-- -but if a single family goes a

single generation without learning about our history and without telling our collective story, that family's share of the image fades into nothingness.

In this era of the disposable, in this time of division and cynicism, let us hold on to that which has always stood for the good, the noble, the smart and the holy. Let us relearn and rediscover and retell the story of our people, our faith and our heritage.

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