

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Yizkor

To Forgive We Must Learn to Forget

5777

This past Summer we celebrated long time Hillcrest members Fryda and Joe Kessel's 70th wedding anniversary. To mark such a momentous and festive occasion, I shared with them one of my favorite stories on the secret to a successful marriage. It goes like this:

An elderly gentleman was invited to his longtime friends' home for dinner one evening. He was impressed by the way his buddy preceded every request to his wife with endearing terms such as Honey, My Love, Darling, Sweetheart and Pumpkin. The couple had been married almost 70 years and, clearly, they were still very much in love. While the wife was in the kitchen, the man leaned over and said to his host, "I think it's wonderful that, after all these years, you still call your wife those loving pet names." The old man hung his head. "I have to tell you the truth," he said, "I forgot her name about 10 years ago."

I am a big believer that the secret to a happy marriage, a long lasting friendship, and a strong family relationship, is a generous measure of forgetfulness.

And yet, it seems that in our tradition, the commandment to remember is always present.

זָכוֹר! זָכוֹר! זָכוֹר!

"From its beginning, Jewish literature has focused intently on the subject of memory. The Torah's oft-repeated rationale, 'because you were slaves in Egypt,' draws on collective memory to promote moral behavior. The assertion that we all stood during the revelation at Sinai is a profound statement that all Jews are bound together in a shared autobiographical experience."¹

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Shoshana Boyd Gelfand: Yizkor: Remembering Through Forgetting. In:
<http://www.reformjudaism.org>

So how can I assert that a generous measure of forgetfulness is indispensable to foster healthy relationships when our tradition commands us over and over again to remember? To answer this question, we must explore what exactly we are commanded to remember.

If you were to open a traditional siddur (Artscroll or the Koren siddur), you will find at the end of the morning service three additions not included in our prayer books. You will find the Ten Commandments, the Thirteen Principles of Faith of Maimonides and something called "the Six Remembrances."

"Jewish history is rife with significance. Some events right at the birth of our nationhood, however, were so significant that God commands us in the Torah to remember them forever. Building on the Midrash, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, codified six such events into his Six Remembrances, and many have the custom to recite these verses every day after morning prayers. They are:

- *Our Exodus from Egypt: '...So that you shall remember the day when you went out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life.' (Deuteronomy 16:3)*
- *The Revelation at Sinai: "But beware and watch yourself very well, lest you forget the things that your eyes saw, and lest these things depart from your heart, all the days of your life, and you shall make them known to your children and to your children's children—the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb.'" (Deuteronomy 4:9–10)*
- *Amalek's Attack on Israel: 'You shall remember what Amalek did to you on the way, when you went out of Egypt, how he happened upon you on the way and cut off all the stragglers at your rear, when you were faint and weary, and did not fear God. [Therefore,] it will be, when the Lord your God grants you respite from all your enemies around [you] in the land which the Lord, your God, gives to you as an inheritance to possess, that you shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens. You shall not forget!' (Deuteronomy 25:17–19)*
- *Rebellion in the Desert: 'Remember, do not forget, how you angered the Lord, your God, in the desert; from the day that you went out of the land of*

Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebelling against the Lord.'
(Deuteronomy 9:7)

- *Miriam's Negative Speech and Punishment: 'Remember what the Lord, your God, did to Miriam on the way, when you went out of Egypt.'* (Deuteronomy 24:9)
- *The Sabbath: 'Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it.'* (Exodus 20:8)²³

So it looks like while the commandment "Zachor!" – "Remember" is essential to our collective memory, its scope is limited only to these "Six Remembrances." In other words: after you remember the Exodus from Egypt, the Giving of the Torah, what Amalek did to us, the rebellion in the desert, Miriam's negative speech and punishment, and the Shabbat, you have fulfilled and even exhausted your collective memory obligation.

Of course there is more to memory than collective memory.

*"Memory is our ability to encode, store, retain and subsequently recall information and past experiences in the human brain."*⁴ "Memory makes us. If we couldn't recall the who, what, where, and when of our everyday lives, we would never be able to manage."⁵ *"Memory is the sum total of what we remember, and gives us the capability to learn and adapt from previous experiences as well as to build*

² Mendy Kaminker: *What Are the Six Remembrances?* <http://www.chabad.org/library>

³ The Six Remembrances (Hebrew)

למען תזכור את יום צאתך מארץ מצרים כל ימי חייך.
כך השמר לב ושמר בפשע מאד, פן תשכח את הדברים אשר באו עיניך, ופן יסורו מלבבך, כל ימי חייך, והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך. יום אשר עמדת לפני יי אלהיך בחרב.
זכור את אשר עשה לב עמלק, בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים. אשר קרב בדרך, ויזנב בך כל הנחשלים אחריך, ואפה עיף וגע, ולא ירא אלהים. והיה בזהנים יי אלהיך לב מכל איביך מסביב, בארץ אשר יי אלהיך נתן לב נחלה לרשתה, תמחה את זכר עמלק מתחת השמים, לא תשכח.
זכר, אל תשכח, את אשר הקצפת את יי אלהיך במדבר.
זכור את אשר עשה יי אלהיך למרים, בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים.
זכור את יום השבת לקדשו.

⁴ http://www.human-memory.net/intro_what.html

⁵ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/memory>

relationships. It is the ability to remember past experiences, and the power or process of recalling to mind previously learned facts, experiences, impressions, skills and habits."⁶

Memory is also essential to self-preservation and survival. If you don't believe me, try forgetting your wedding anniversary.

However, as I hinted before, I would like to suggest that our ability to forget, otherwise known as selective memory, is also essential to self-preservation and survival.

During the Ten Days of repentance we read Psalm 130. Verse 3 reads:

אָם עֲוֹנוֹת תִּשְׁמַר יְהוָה, אֲדָנִי, מִי יִצְמַד.

"If you were to remember wrongs, oh God, who could survive?"

In other words, even God seems to have a selective memory when judging His creatures.

יִזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים נַשְׁמוֹת כָּל קְרוֹבֵי וּקְרוֹבוֹתֵי שְׁהֵלְכוּ לְעוֹלָמָם

*"May God remember forever my dear ones who have gone to their eternal home."*⁷

During Yizkor we ask God to remember our loved ones with selective memory, the same way we remember them, the same way we wish to be remembered...

"Yizkor is the one moment in the Jewish liturgical calendar when what matters is not communal but individual memory, each of us standing personally consumed by singular memories of relatives and friends who are no longer here with us. Yizkor encourages an evolution of our own private relationship. Each time we recite Yizkor and remember, we deepen the parts of that relationship that sustain us, while forgetting those characteristics that do not. In some ways, then, Yizkor ("Remember!") should more accurately be called Yishkach ("Forget!"), as forgetting is a necessary part of the process by which we maintain meaningful memories."⁸

⁶ http://www.human-memory.net/intro_what.html

⁷ Yizkor service.

Just two weeks ago, on September 25, we were privileged at Hillcrest Jewish Center to watch the documentary "Survival in Shanghai." Please allow me to share with you a short testimony from the film, by survivor Ruth Zimmerman:

*"Epidemic diseases like smallpox, malaria, plague, and typhoid fever were rampant within the ghetto. Once an epidemic of typhoid fever broke out, 300-400 people would be infected. Refugees were often too afraid to go to the hospitals because the conditions were even worse over there. Getting hold of medicine was difficult because it was being controlled by the Japanese. Both Dr. Zucker and his wife were doctors. When I got typhoid, Dr. Zucker came to treat me at home. He told my mother he would not send me to a hospital, because 'she will never come out.' My parents were sitting by my bed, each one 12 hours every day and night to take care of me. Dr. Zucker came every day to take care of me. I remember we didn't have any money anymore and I needed medication, and papa said 'don't worry, I'll get you the medicine.' So he went and sold his watch. I will never forget it. He sold it to get me my medicine. That is what a parent does. I will never forget it"*⁹

Ruth Zimmerman could have recalled any particular episode from her father's life, and yet, she chose to recall this particular one: *"So he went and sold his watch. I will never forget it. He sold it to get me my medicine. That is what a parent does. I will never forget it."*

Like with Ruth Zimmerman's story, there are things that should never be forgotten. Ruth Zimmerman's selective memory served her well. It gave her strength in times of distress and comfort in time of loss.

Selective memory, however, has an essential counterpart which I would like to call "selective forgetfulness." In other words, the same way we choose what to remember, we can choose what to forget.

On past occasions, I spoke about forgiveness. It is, I must confess, one of my favorite subjects. Not necessarily because I am good at forgiving but because I believe that those who learn how to forgive live happier, more meaningful lives.

⁸ Shoshana Boyd Gelfand: Yizkor: Remembering Through Forgetting. In: <http://www.reformjudaism.org>

⁹ Survival in Shanghai. SMG News.

And yet learning how to forgive ain't easy because as psychotherapist Lynette Hoy explains, "human behavior suggests that people are 'hard-wired' to retaliate when they have been hurt by another person. Our pride and self-esteem is injured, our expectations and dreams are disappointed.... Automatic thoughts or beliefs impede us from forgiving others. We tell ourselves, 'I won't forgive because he never accepts responsibility for what he does' or 'I would be a hypocrite if I forgave because I do not feel like forgiving' or 'Forgiving is only for weak people.'"¹⁰

My favorite one is: "Rabbi, I can forgive, but I can't forget!"

So coming full circle, let me suggest that in order to live more meaningful lives, we must learn to forgive, and to forgive, I am afraid, we must also learn to forget.

The Jewish imperative to remember only applies to collective memory and it is circumscribed to the "Six Remembrances."

We must remember what Amalek did to us; we must remember we were slaves in Egypt, but we must learn to forget what Mrs. Goldstein did to us 40 years ago.

Forgiveness is not a gift we give to others. It is a gift we give to ourselves.

I am telling you this with a lot of love: it is OK to forgive, to let go, even to forget. You can do it. We all can do it! Let's cut the strings that pull us down, and work on making our lives better ones.

As we recall our loved ones with kindness, making use of our selective memory and our selective forgetfulness, we ask God to selectively help us forget whatever is that is bringing us down, filling us up with hatred, resentment, sadness and loneliness, and to selectively help us remember whatever is going to lift us up, making us happier, more sensitive, and more compassionate human beings.

May the memory of our loved ones be for a blessing, and may God remember us with kindness and grant us all a good, sweet, healthy, joyous and meaningful year. Amen.

¹⁰ <https://powertochange.com/discover/life/forgivehard/>