

More Than a Memory
Rosh Hashanah 5772
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The world is a very scary place these days. The uncertainty-- over there, around the corner, under here, somewhere, everywhere-- has created a dis-ease, a dis-equilibrium, a dis-satisfaction, a dis-integration in every direction. Where should we turn?

I'm pleased to say that you have come to the right place. It can be here. It should be here where you can find sanctuary in this sanctuary, a moment of repose to collect yourself to turn in so that you might turn out, not to escape but to contemplate and prepare yourself—to brace yourself—to face the world.

I want to speak about memory, not the way we will speak about it on Yom Kippur when our memories are attached to particular people. Rather, I want to turn our attention to how we use memory and how our tradition enfolds it into the very way we understand our past, our present, and our future.

I have been thinking a lot about memory lately as we not only sent our eldest off to college a couple of weeks ago but also as I travelled to a suburb outside of Pittsburgh to help my mom prepare to move out of my childhood home. My hippocampus and amygdale, the memory center of my and our brains, have been in overdrive. I grew up in a town populated in the 1950's where the developer expressed his aspirations for the future of the children who grow up there by naming all of the streets after colleges as if this, in some way, would help to inspire us (or get us in). While Colgate, Bucknell, and Harvard were up the hill and on other streets, we managed to end up on a road called St. Vincent Drive, named after a lovely school in Western Pennsylvania. However, at our dinner table we thought the street should have been renamed Brandeis since my brother, sister, and I all went there!

When I was there on St. Vincent Drive this summer, I walked around the yard on a beautiful sunny day with thousands of scenes playing themselves out in my head: playing in the sprinkler; perfecting the cartwheel which never happened; and hours spent practicing the hula hoop. I smiled because it wasn't just the past passing before me, that home had to do with the person I had become. The past mixed with the present. The feeling was even more profound as we drove away from our home in the beginning of September loaded to the brim with Jacob's possessions. Right after he was born, I spoke from this pulpit the sage advice someone had given me when I was pregnant. They said I shouldn't worry because at that point while he was still in my belly, I knew where he was and what he was doing. As we drove up the street, giddy with excitement, we were literally and figuratively heading into his future with its own anticipated memories. When we finally arrived at the school, I cried—not just because I was saying goodbye but because I didn't get to stay and partake of college myself...again. But then, in my mind's experience of memory, it seemed as I had just been at college myself.

Memories aren't linear and neither are our lives. We visit, revisit, transfix and transform what has happened, how it is happening, and what will happen. The past informs the present which carries us into the future and brings us back again to a different point and a different understanding of our lives.

When my husband was in medical school, he received an invitation from the US Government to become a medical exchange student to the People's Republic of China. Back then, in 1979, China had just begun to open its doors to foreigners following the end of the Cultural Revolution. There were only a few dozen Americans in the entire country. The isolated Chinese people were not accustomed to seeing someone like him: taller with blue eyes and a head full of curly blond hair. One day, a woman approached him

on the bus. She came up to him face to face, only inches away invading David's personal space. When David asked her in Chinese why she was staring and so close, she was quite embarrassed and surprised; first that David spoke Chinese and second because she thought he was blind. She explained that she was an ophthalmologist and had never seen blue eyes except in text books. Now fast forward 32 years. We agreed to send our blue eyed son, Jacob, to China for his last semester of high school. A subway now runs through Beijing. China has more than allowed the West to penetrate its culture. Jacob wrote to us to tell us about an incident he experienced. He was crammed into the subway, face to face with a Chinese man. It was so crowded that he couldn't even turn his head. Directly in front of him, he observed something curious: This Chinese man had blue eyes. The man noticed Jacob's quizzical look, smiled, and then explained what Jacob saw in this man's eyes: "Contacts!"

Blue eyes of a foreigner in one generation become contacts in another. Our lives spiral and circle back again. We understand our memories differently as we live and relive certain moments for ourselves and through others.

Memory holds a significant place on Rosh Hashanah for this day is called *Yom haZikaron* in our liturgy, a Day of Remembering. We see it many times, even as a theme in the Shofar service. The Torah speaks of the commemoration of this day as a Day of *Teruah*, the shofar blast, a remembrance.

The concept of remembering on Rosh Hashanah creates a bit of a conundrum. If it is a day of remembering, then why say *LeShanah Tovah*, the greeting wishing a good New Year to come? Why regard it as the Sefat Emet? A 19th century Hasidic teacher did referring to with its literal translation: Head of the Year. The year flows forth from the Head, the *rosh*, the beginning, like a riverhead? And yet, the invoking of memory connected to

the shofar takes us back to multiple earlier moments in time such as tradition's belief of the blast of the shofar at creation or the receiving of the tablets from Mount Sinai heralded by the blast. These are all moments of Israel's past. Yet still on the other hand, the sound of the shofar will be sounded in the future in a Messianic declaration of redemption. So, is it possible to recall the future? Encapsulated in the experience of Rosh Hashanah, we get the conflation of past, present, and future. On Rosh Hashanah, we spend the day "remembering". Remembering our past; putting it in the context of our present, but being open to the multiple possibilities of what our future can and might include.

This is not new to Judaism. Jewish ritual and custom invoke past, present and future as the most sacred of life's moments. We know this from the Seder when we say it is our obligation to see ourselves, *Ke'ilu*, as if, we went forth from slavery.

It happens under the *chuppah*, the wedding canopy. Seven blessings tell a story which starts in the Garden of Eden with the creation of human beings. The blessings then propel themselves to a future moment when all will be gathered on the streets of Jerusalem with joy and gladness like the happy wedding couple in that present moment under the *chuppah*, a window to eternity. Once again, past, present, and future merge.

We reconstruct the past in order to model it for the future and read the present into both. Time is relative and actually artificial. 5772 years ago, no one said, "Set your watches now," or "start counting." There are actually more than 20 versions of the calendar besides the calendar we use in the secular world.

On Rosh Hashanah, we open ourselves to creating a vision of our own future based on our understanding of the past and the present. Not all of our past is perfect. Some of it is even traumatic. We

also know the future will arrive no matter what we do. How we regard it all and what we do with it, however, is in our control.

In Judaism, we move in a circular motion. Defining Teshuvah as “repentance” does not do it justice. Moses Maimonides called Teshuvah a positive commandment. It means the act of turning. It means coming around again in a constant state of remembering, applying wisdom and experience, to transform our behavior, our outlook, our lives. Teshuvah enables us to perceive the way we view the world differently. Teshuvah, the act of turning, returning, reviewing, re-collecting, recasting and reframing our understanding has the power to transform the way we respond now and the way we will construct our respective futures.

Have you ever played back a conversation in your head, interacting as if you could push the replay button? You are not acting in that previous moment. You are using the present with its transformed understanding to inform your reaction to that situation. You have already processed the past and integrated it into the present. Hindsight is 20/20.

So is looking forward, potentially: The Talmud (Men 29b) has multiple tales which are not factual but reveal truths nonetheless. In one story, when Moses went up on high to receive the Torah, he found the Holy One sitting and embellishing each letter with calligraphic marks. He said to the Holy One: “Ruler of the Universe, why do you need to add these marks?” The Holy One answered: “There is a man who will appear at the end of several generations and Akiva the son of Joseph is his name and he will need these crowns, because from each and every calligraphic mark above the letter he will derive scores and scores of laws.” Moses implores, “Ruler of the Universe, show this man to me.” The Holy One said, “Turn around!”

So, Moses went and sat in the back of Rabbi Akiva’s class who lived in first century of the Common Era, in other words, several

millennia after Moses lived. Moses had no idea what they were saying with regard to Torah passages. It sounded nothing like what he was receiving from Sinai. He did not understand their interpretation and became weak and disoriented. Soon the class reached an issue and a student asked, “Rabbi Akiba, what’s your source for this ruling?” He said, “It’s a law of Moses from Sinai.” Ah, the past recalled in order to inform a moment in the future. Moses was relieved.

At the precise moment when Moses is up on the mountain for those 40 days and 40 nights he “goes back to the future.” The story is wildly imaginative. God surely did not take pen to parchment and literally serve as calligrapher scribe, but the message is clear. Embedded in the Torah scroll itself, these crowns, as they are called, adorn the letters as a sacred reminder that the Torah not only contains the past and the present but the future as well.

Why should this be important? When we reach a point of awareness of how everything in time, each moment, each experience has the power to inform us; every thing potentially becomes an instrument of our own redemption, our own promise for the potential of what is to come. This is the essence of this day. As time circles around us, we can acknowledge the truth of our own lives in the fullness of our individual and collective past, present, and future.

“*Hashiveinu Venashuva kekedem*” are the words the book of Lamentations ends with *Return to us and we will return to You, as in the beginning..*

On this day, we can go back to the beginning. Certainly, we call this day *Yom Harat Olam*, the day of the world’s birth, but what if we saw it as our birth as well. *Kekedem*, like the beginning. Like a fresh place. Like a day to contemplate what paths our lives will take from this day forth not simply a reflection of all the days that have passed behind us. How will we plot a future course? How

might we open our hearts, search our soul to turn around and look ahead with greater clarity and purpose?

Every single one of us in this room was once a child. There is no escaping it. You can't be here if you weren't there, and yet does that experience need to remain solely in the past? From a child's point of view, the world is a great wonder. The fascination is unspoiled. Our minds were facile, elastic, plastic and open to the new and different (except food with weird texture or was green or touched any thing else on the plate.) We were not yet tainted by so many disappointments, hesitant to the potential of failure, frightened by all that is wrong or by the fact that unexpected tragedies happen to good people all the time, even people we know and love. Think of a picture of yourself as a child. Her face is sweet. His expression sparkles. What do you want to tell that little human being? Watch out? Be careful? No, we want to share hope and potential. Rather than limit them, we express excitement for the future. Their future! We want them to know that there are many paths which they may choose. It is not about perfection but possibility. Failure and disappointment are also their teachers. You can't warn that child. You can only celebrate him. You can only rejoice for her. Remember her. Remember him. Let that memory inspire you even now to go forward.

When we say on this day, "we remember," we also recognize God remembers. We invoke our communal memory for God taking note of our ancestors, of God remembering the covenant, of God paying attention. And though we may not feel we are direct recipients of God's focus, we are. This day tells each of us, "You matter!" The Mishnah on Rosh Hashanah states that on this day we pass before God like sheep passing before a shepherd who wants to make sure each one is counted. I realize that we ARE not sheep and God is not a shepherd, but the ancient metaphor still makes its point. You can't blend into the crowd. We are not alone in our own isolated universe. Like the voice on the phone which

tells us that our call is being monitored for training purposes, here, in a “metaspiritual” way, we are noticed.

When I was 5 years old, I loved to watch the television show, Romper Room. It was very early reality TV when they took children from the community and did stuff on live TV. In each episode, Miss Janie (the title, Ms. then wasn't even an option) would take a special mirror and name the children she could see through the television screen. “And I see Betsy, and Michael, and Mark, and Linda, and she never said she saw me! Much to my dismay. There I was every day. How could she miss me? So I showed her. I had my mom call the station and the next thing I knew I was having my two weeks of fame on live TV as a participant myself on Romper Room. I was then able to ask Miss Janie personally to notice me when she looked through the special magical looking glass. You can imagine my delight the following week after my experience on reality TV as I sat at home to hear Miss Janie see Elaine right through the television screen. I wanted to be seen.

The whole universe is paying attention to us, not just Miss Janie. Our tradition conveys this idea in the Torah. When Moses makes his final poetic speech to the Israelites as they stand perched preparing to enter into their future, into the land, he uses the following image: “Give ear O Heavens, let me speak. Let the earth hear the words I utter. .” Heaven and earth are aware of our presence. In ten days at Yom Kippur when we hear the words from Deuteronomy: “I call Heaven and earth to witness...” we are reminded again. Heaven and earth are watching. Metaphors for sure, but the message has cosmic significance. Remembering is about being noticed and being noticed means we matter. By mattering, we connect to a larger purpose with meaning.

It is for this reason Rosh Hashanah is also called *Yom HaDin*. The day of Judgment. Not only **who** we are and **that** we are matters, but what we do has unmatched significance.

Rabbi Bernard Bamberger, a prominent Reform rabbi of the 20th century, takes this idea to an even higher level: He says: It matters what each of us does with our lives, our talents and powers, our resources and opportunities. No person's behavior is just private enterprise. What we do, what we try to do and to be makes a difference not only to ourselves and to those around us but to humanity, to the universe and to God.

And this impacts the future at every moment.

Bachia Ibn Pakuda taught: Your life is like a scroll, write on it what you want remembered. We project into the future what will become our past.

On this day of remembering, our past, our present, and our future, we ask God *Zochreinu lechaim*. Remember us towards life. It is all we have. Life and living it.

Yes, the world is a scary place. Uncertainty pervades. But this we know: Rosh Hashanah provides the opening to ponder what we can do to harness all of the positive, creative, compassionate and sacred obligations we are capable of. We can choose a more optimistic future for ourselves, for those who come after us, and yes, for the world, too. Let us use this day and this time and the swirling, rotational pull of the life which surrounds us to harvest hope for a broken world waiting to be redeemed.

These sources among others helped inform my thinking about this sermon topic:

In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind
by Eric Kandel

The Creation of Anamnesis in Innovative Rituals for Newborn Jewish Girls A paper written for delivery at the 2010 meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy in San Francisco by Rabbi Debra Reed Blank, Ph.D..

This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation by Alan Lew

Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi