

YOM HA ZIKARON ON JEWISH MEMORY

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One of the names for Rosh Hashanah is *Yom Ha-zikaron*, the Day of Remembrance. On this day, according to our tradition, our deeds are remembered and weighed, The Book of Life is opened, the judgement is written. I want to remind you that the rabbis teach us that on Rosh Hashanah this judgement is only final for the very righteous and the extremely wicked. For everyone else, we who fall into a category called “*beinoni*” -- meaning neither wholly righteous nor wholly wicked--the next ten days of repentance, teshuva, are an opportunity. They are an opportunity to consciously take an assessment of where we are in our life and to move in a different direction.

I think for most of us this imagery still works. Even if we do not believe the story literally—the hand that writes, the book that seals our destiny--we somehow know that our destiny is already in place, as long as we do not change the direction we are moving, with the baggage we are carrying, the habits we have created, the relationships we have spoiled, the flaws we have not improved, the blindnesses we do not challenge

Of course this is true at every moment in our lives. But somehow this practice of Rosh Hashanah, the confluence of factors; the season of the year, a time of change; the power of our liturgy and prayer to move us; the renewal of ties and connection with our Jewish community; all these together seem to give us the ability to make some real progress at this time.

So there is a personal aspect to this question of *zikaron*, of memory.

Apart from its spiritual content, the new year has come to have another meaning for us in our modern day observance. Many who do not find themselves here all year round make a point of coming together on these high holidays. We feel a desire to renew our connection with one another, and perhaps with some of these beautiful melodies that burrow down to a secret place in the heart, that carry some memories of their own, of times and places and people that have gone before us

So Rosh Hashanah, when we are all gathered together, it is a time for reclaiming or re-evaluating or renewing our sense of connection to our spiritual tradition. And to our identity as Jews

I want to explore this subject of how we understand our Jewish identity with you all here this morning. And I include in the “you” not only those who have been born Jewish or converted formally to Judaism, but everyone in this room who, at some level, I think considers themselves to be a part of this Jewish community. These words are meant for you if you can say: “I am a Jew” or “I identify with the Jewish community as a spiritual home.” Even if there may be some parts of our tradition with which you are uncomfortable. Even if you are uncomfortable or resistant or have been wounded

by religious language in general, or by the Jewish community in particular

I think in many ways the Jewish community today, in both America and Israel
Is at a kind of crossroads, in regards to understanding our identity--in understanding who
we are and perhaps who we want to be.

I sometimes feel that in Jewish life we are reaching a place where two distinct paths are
beginning to diverge. About what it means to say, "I am a Jew" or even
I identify with the Jewish people, and with Judaism, as my spiritual home

IN EVERY GENERATION A PERSON MUST SEE THEMSELF...

The classic statement of identity and memory can be found in a single line in the
Passover Haggadah. It goes like this:

B'chol dor va-dor khayav adam lir'ot et atzmo, k'ilu hu yatza mimitzrayim.
In every generation a person should see him/herself as one who came out of Egypt

The memory of this slavery and this redemption is to be the touchstone of our seeing
ourselves, of our understanding ourselves.

On one level, the remembering of the exodus event can be an exhortation to gratitude,
pure and simple. In every generation, we are to look back with gratitude at the act of
having been freed from slavery. This look back affirms the power of God to liberate the
people then and now (however we understand this). It affirms that the arc of justice once
and forever moves from slavery towards freedom. In this sense, it reminds us that God is
encountered by our people, first and foremost, as the one who breaks the power of tyrants
and Pharaohs.. And then as the one who brings us to Mt Sinai to give us laws to live by
so we do not become tyrants ourselves.

The remembrance of slavery in Egypt, though, is not only a memory of gratitude for
God's interventions.. It also shapes our self-understanding, and the meaning of our
history. It reminds us that our history began in a moment of deep oppression, one which,
in fact, continued throughout the ages with other Pharaohs, and other Egypts.

The Haggadah, as it develops in the middle ages, in the years of crusades and expulsions
and terror, even emphasizes this message, by saying

Elah she b'chol dor va'dor: In every generation
"omdim aleinu l'chaloteinu" there arose those who sought to destroy us
"vhakadosh baruch hu" and the Holy One
"Maztilenu miyadam" saved us from their hands

I am coming to believe that *this* kind of memory, also has a dark side.
We have inherited, even before the Holocaust, what I would like to call

the “persecution theory” of Jewish identity, a way of defining ourselves as an ever-persecuted minority. I am uncomfortable with this kind of memory, perhaps because I sense that there is a distinct tendency in our Jewish community, both here and in perhaps even more so in Israel, to frame our identity in this way.

And the framing of Jewish memory that is based primarily on the memory of historical grievance can easily become a defensive, and even an aggressive one, an exclusive story of Jewish persecution and oppression.

This tendency to view the world as a threatening place, where Jewish rights need to be asserted in the face of all others--either as a compensation for the imbalance of the past or as a bulwark against what is still perceived as a threatening world--this can veer over, sometime all too quickly, into a kind of chauvinism, or worse.

The recent Nation State law, passed by the Israeli Knesset, is a good example of this danger. The attempt to write into law provisions that will prioritize Jewish rights at the expense of minorities who are also citizens of the state, and omitting the term “democratic” from the language of Basic Law, is very troubling. And I am not the only one to think so.

Both here and in Israel, this outlook sometimes pushes us to a place where we are always on the lookout for enemies. And in our time, perhaps creates a blindness to our own **actual** position in the world, our actual privilege and our power.

This is why I have always had some difficulty with this way of understanding Jewish memory and its uses. And frankly, this is not my Jewish identity

IN EVERY GENERATION A PERSON MUST BE SEEN...

My Jewish identity is actually based on that same statement in the Haggadah. But in a slightly different version. It is very close to the traditional one. In fact, it differs by only a single letter--the letter *hey*. It appears in Moses Maimonides’ text of the Haggadah, as he presents it in his Code of Jewish Law, the *Mishneh Torah*. In Maimonides’ Haggadah, the verse reads:

B’khol dor va dor, khayav adam l’har’ot et atzmo, k’ilu hu yatza mimitzrayim

In every generation a person must **show him or herself**

In every generation a Jew must **be seen** (by others)

In every generation a Jew must **demonstrate**

That he or she had personally gone forth from Egypt.

To *show oneself* as a person who has gone out of Egypt, to *be seen* by others as a person who has gone out of Egypt, means that our actions, and not only our thoughts, will demonstrate that we understand the mechanics of oppression and the precarious situation of minorities--what it is like to be a foreigner, an immigrant--by what we stand for and

act upon, not only what we think about ourselves

As I try to understand the reason for Maimonides version for small addition of a single letter to the text, I want to suggest that these are two different types of Jewish memory and identity

“**To see ones self**” as one who went forth from Egypt is self-referential, inward-looking memory, which ends at the boundaries of the group. “**To be seen as one**” who went forth from Egypt turns the focus to how our behavior appears to others and how we engage with them

My Jewish memory and identity is not about ”what happened to us” (though this is part of it). Jewish memory and identity is about knowing in **every** generation, what it feels like to be the object of hatred, misunderstanding, violence and injustice. Memory is about retaining that sensitivity to these experiences, and to be active in confronting them, as an **expression** of our Jewish identity.

These are not secondary concerns, secondary to Jewish identity and Jewish survival. These are what **makes up** our identity.

HOW DOES THE TORAH UNDERSTAND THIS MEMORY?

It might be interesting to see how the Torah itself understands the meaning of this memory of having been a slave in Egypt. Over and over again, as it gives us commandments which end with the phrase, “ for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” or something like that. If we look at some of these, I think we will find a common thread:

Exodus 23:9 Do not oppress the stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt

Leviticus 19:33 Do not wrong the foreigner who lives in your midst ; he shall have the rights of citizens , and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt

Leviticus 19:35 You shall have honest weights and scales...I am the Lord your God who freed you from the land of Egypt

Leviticus 25:35 If your countryman falls on economic hardship...do not take advantage of his situation do not take interest from the poor or charge him interest for food...I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt

Deuteronomy 24:19 When you reap the harvest of you field, or the grapes of your vineyard, do not reap them all the way. Leave them for the stranger, the fatherless, the widow. Always remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt.

You get the idea: be scrupulous about justice; have honest weights and scales; dedicate part of your resources to the most vulnerable—widow orphan stranger levite--to sustain them in dignity; do not use a widow's coat for collateral; do not take interest on loans to the poor; treat the foreigner who has come to live with you as the native born, and love him. *Zikaron*/ memory in the Torah is not about where we have come from, about what was done to us. The memory of Egypt in the Torah is most often about how we will act towards others.

REMEMBERING AMALEK

Even the commandment to “Remember what Amalek did to you” a Biblical story of a time when we *were* attacked by an enemy , can be understood two different ways.

There is another famous “*remember!*” in the Torah. It has to do with the the story of Amalek found in the book of Exodus. No sooner have we escaped from slavery in Egypt, and are making our way through the wilderness, then we are attacked by a powerful tribe called Amalek. They attacked the stragglers, the weak, the slow, the defenseless, the ones who lagged behind. God commands Moses to raise some fighters and to go into battle against Amalek. The battle is successful. But this is not the end of the story. Something about this incident has left a deep wound.

Later, in the book of Deuteronomy, God tells the people to “remember what Amalek did to you” and proclaims an eternal battle throughout the generations between God and Amalek. And orders us to “blot out the memory of Amalek.”

The commandment to exterminate Amalek is a terrible one. And our sages have wrestled with it mightily over time. But I think how we understand this depends on how we understand our identity s Jews.

If our Jewish history is focused only on our own story, our own history, what has happened to **us**, like Pharaoh, like Amalek, like Hitler, then we might be tempted to look for Amalek *in every generation*. And we may come to believe that any who might oppose us are, like Amalek, enemies not only of us but also of God, and that God commands us to wage a holy war against them.

But if we understand the meaning of Jewish memory as **showing** that you understand what it means to have been attacked by the Amaleks of this world--to have seen the way that the powerful prey on the weak, to have felt what it was like to be defenseless; then the commandment to wipe out the memory of Amalek will spur us to work for a world where the powerful no longer prey on the weak.

To show that you **remember** what Amalek did to you means that you—as part of your own self-understanding as a Jew--will make a special effort to defend those who are smaller, or minorities, or weaker, and to curb the abuse of the powerful. To create a world where the memory of Amalek is no more, where these evils and hatreds are truly forgotten.

NEVER AGAIN

Think of the slogan “**Never Again**,” which became the watchword of Jewish community in the years following the Holocaust. For some this means: Jewish blood will never again be spilled with impunity. We will never again allow ourselves to be at the mercy of an uncaring world . Never again to be defenseless.

I agree with this understanding.

But “**Never Again**” can also mean: Since we as a people have experienced the way a regime can demonization of a minority and fan ethnic hatred for the purpose of consolidating its power, we will resist that as a *Jewish* obligation. We who have seen how theories of racial superiority can have murderous consequences, how they can poison a society and bring out the worst in human beings; we indeed say **Never Again**.

We will be engaged in the current discussion in our town and in our country, about critiquing and dismantling the structures of white supremacy in America as an overtly Jewish obligation. And perhaps we will feel the need to be especially certain that --for those of us who have been designated as white—the insidious and ever-present worldview of white privilege has not taken root in us. Even if unconsciously.

For in every generation a Jew must show herself as one who understand these things.

Every few months there are articles that speak of the works of art that were looted from Jewish owners during the Holocaust. When I read these stories, I am reminded of the fact That it is not only Jewish *artwork* that has been looted. But that someone is living in the house that my father lived in, and that my mother was born in. And sitting on their furniture, and eating with their good silver. And profiting from the businesses that were taken from them, which they passed along to their children and grandchildren. And that my story of dispossession can be multiplied six million times over.

When I think of this history, my first reaction is not to get reparations for myself . Rather, I will be asking the question: Who has profited from this dispossession in our society?

The words I am about to speak will not be comfortable for everyone. I myself do not think I would have used them even two years ago, before the events of August 12 drew us up short here in Charlottesville, before we took upon ourselves--many of us—to looking at the extent of the racism still active in our public life , and to look at it intensely and unflinchingly.

One of the things that I am coming to see from my community pilgrimage to Montgomery, from the places I visited, and from my recent visit to the Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. is how the ideology and practice of what I am now comfortable calling *white supremacy* in this country found a way in every generation and in every situation to advantage white people and disadvantage people of color.

What are the consequences generations of free labor of African Americans, first through slavery, then through share cropping , then through dispossession as those who could no longer bear the terror of the Jim Crow south with its lynchings and its segregated laws left everything behind and moved north ? How is it that we still call this exodus a “great migration” instead of “the largest unaddressed refugee crisis in American history” which created northern cities that became centers of poverty for one race in this country?

What is the economic legacy, the ongoing dispossession even today, of generations of inequality: in hiring, in education, in neighborhoods, in housing, in the allocation of public resources, in policing, in sentencing?

I am committed to understanding this even more. And to think about how it needs to be addressed. Because in every generation a Jew should demonstrate that he does understands what it is like to leave Egypt .

IMMIGRATION

As a Jewish American, both of whose parents came to this country from Germany and from Poland as refugees from state violence, and from gang violence, my starting point for thinking about questions of immigration is gratitude that the America of 70 years ago and even 100 years ago did not build a wall to keep out my desperate family. Though it did pass legislation that limited it severely.

I want to be seen—by the way I speak and the policies I advocate for--as one who understands the motives behind those who are desperate to get into our country.

I want to be clear that none of the above prescribes a **particular** political solution to the problems of the treatment of minorities, or the legacy of white supremacy, or the questions of immigration. On these things, we Jews can disagree. Some will take a conservative approach, some a liberal one, some a radical one. But the stance: the place from which we look at these issues; the caring about them in very personal ways and acting on them in demonstrable ways, are a part of how we understand what Judaism stands for. And what it means to be a Jew today.

Because in every generation a Jew must show ones self
As one who knows what it is like to come forth from Egypt.

IF I AM FOR MYSELF...

I do not think these two kinds of memory, the inward-looking and the outer-directed are mutually exclusive. But they need to go together. the first-century Rabbi, Hillel, stated it most succinctly in *Pirke Avot*:

He asked: *If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*

But he followed that up quickly with a second question: *If I am for myself alone,*

what am I?

We, in our communal institutions, our UJA, our ADL's our URJ's, our Wiesenthal Centers, have gotten good about asking the first question. I would like us to be a little better about answering the second question as well. And perhaps even centering that question as the future of America Jewish life.

I want to be clear. I do not want to be seen by others in a certain way because I need their approval of who I am, or their validation for my faith and my identity. Or even their certificate of acceptance in American society. I want to be seen by others in a certain way from a standpoint of confidence and even of mission.

Because we are finally reaching the point where, because of our acceptance in American society, Judaism and the Jewish community can offer its distinct spiritual voice to inform the political and cultural conversation. We have inherited a tradition that has examined and considered these core questions--of economic justice, responsibility, forgiveness, reparations, the obligation of individuals and society to one another, charity, and more. It is a tradition that is both rigorous intellectually and deeply spiritual. It offers guidance on how to live from the perspective of what it means to bring holiness into the world. From the understanding of what God requires of us and of what it means to be a full human being.

I think of for how many generations we had to keep these spiritual perspectives to ourselves. We could engage in these conversations in only theoretical ways, talking to ourselves in the synagogues or the houses of study. No one else cared to listen. (And that is an understatement). But today we have an ability to bring these teachings to the table Of public discourse and to share them with others, and put them into practice. This is perhaps the first time in all these many centuries of the Jewish story that we can allow this particular Jewish voice to go to work on the perennial problems of humankind both here and in Israel. In a way that past generations could only have dreamed about.

IF NOT YOU, WHO?

I want to end with another thought, that takes the words of Hillel just a little bit further. Hillel's three-question sermon recently got what must be the most publicity that *any* statement from the Mishnah has ever had. Two weeks ago, I heard it spoken on the big screen in the recent film *Black Klansman*. In that film Hillel's words are put into the mouth of the actor playing the character of Stokely Carmichael . In the film, he is addressing some black activist students in Colorado. And he boldly proclaims Hillel's three part sermon:

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am for myself alone, what am I
If not now, when?*

And then he adds something that Hillel did not say, but perhaps would have wanted : say:
If not you, who?

If not you, who? I hope each of us will ask this question. *If not me, then who?*
Would another person know, by my actions and commitments, that I am a person who
knows what it is like to have been in Egypt ?

If not, then why not? And what is it that I need to do to give a different answer to myself?

Shanah Tovah.