

Shabbat Zachor 5770

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On this special Shabbat of Remembering, Shabbat Zachor, the Hebrew calendar, as in most years, pairs the regular Torah parshiya of Tetzaveh with the supplementary scroll that contains two mitzvot: the commandment to remember what Amalek did to us and the commandment to erase the name of Amalek until the end of time. The reference in the second scroll is of course to the battle and triumph over Amalek that we read at the end of Beshallah last month.

At first glance, it would be hard to find two more dissimilar sections of the Torah. In Tetzaveh, we see elaborate, loving descriptions of the priestly apron and breastplate and incense altar along with the excruciating details surrounding the slaughtering of the bull and rams. For Shabbat Zachor, we remember the battle against Amalek. Finding something in common with these two scrolls has challenged bnei mitzvot for generations. A common first response is that the Tetzaveh parshiyah talks about aspects of continuity with the eternal lamp and the successorship of responsibilities after Moses, both of which share elements of memory. But I think that there is something more profound going on here. The pairing of these two very different sections of the Torah provides us a rare Shabbat opportunity to explore the nature of memory, what we remember and why, and what it takes for a collective memory to stay alive.

Let me start with a question, though. We customarily regard remembering as one of our core religious values. We recite Yizkor at festivals and anniversaries, Zichronot at the shofar service (where we remember all of the times that God remembered the Jewish

people); In the Zohar, God's remembrance of the covenant with Abraham is the foundation of the entire Torah and for the Baal shem tov, remembering is the basis for redemption. But where does the preoccupation with remembering come from? If we examine carefully our 613 mitzvot, how many other times are we commanded to remember? We can study the mitzvot inside out for weeks and we won't find any other commandments to remember. Even with respect to Shabbat, the original mitzvah of remembering the Shabbat was clarified and replaced in the retelling of the mitzvot in VaEschanan with shamor-to observe and safeguard the Shabbat. So why does the only remembrance mitzvah appear at this morning's torah reading and why at one that features Teztaveh events and descriptions very far removed from Amalek? And if only to underscore the uniqueness of this Mitzvah, why do the very last words of the Shabbat Zachor portion tell us Lo Tishkach-you had better not forget this one.?

We might want to take a few minutes to examine the nature of remembering. We would not be the first to do so, and many 20th century authors who are looking over my shoulder tried to tackle this one. We instinctively know a few things. First, most of what we experience in any day or night is forgotten and stored in a memory cell that won't be re-opened. And what we do remember is usually not the event itself, but a memory of the most recent recollection of that event, which in turn might be based on hundreds of previous recollections. Memory also carries with it some distortion. The great Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges likened memory to a pile of coins, with the distortion running down from coin to coin with each recollection. For anyone who has read his stories such as *El Alef*, Borges reminds us that our minds are porous, and the effort to truly and accurately remember something, even as intimate as the face of a former lover, is

doomed to fail because of the effects of time on the human memory. So remembering is not such an easy thing, and perhaps the creator of our mitzvot took compassion on us by not overwhelming us with too many affirmative obligations to remember.

And what makes something memorable? Can it be superimposed from outside, akin to cramming for an examination with memory aids? In the 1500's the Vatican had a great idea for converting the millions of potential Catholics in China. The Vatican sent father Matteo Ricci to China to extol the glories of the Catholic tradition, including both the ritual objects and by demonstrating scientific knowledge and world maps. His plan was to instill the pillars of the Catholic faith through memory. Father Ricci taught the Chinese elaborate pneumonics or memory aids, to remember, and the structures were called "memory palaces." Through those palaces, the Chinese would integrate their memory of the New Testament and carry it forward. Those efforts were the subject of an intriguing work by Jonathan Spence in the 1980's describing the memory palaces, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*. Did it work? No. It didn't hold because what was to be remembered was external to the experience of the Chinese. And while it is true that there are pockets of Catholics in China in the 21st century, none claim a link or collective memory of the Matteo Ricci memory palaces.

Closer to home, we read, particularly in the American southwest and in Spanish/Portugese-speaking countries, about families who are now discovering through DNA or genealogy that they are descended from Jewish families who had converted, willingly or unwillingly, to Catholicism 400-500 years earlier. When interviewed, do any recall the Jewish experience through family stories or memories? Maybe a very distant recollection of a recipe or quaint practice, but in general, no. What was once

remembered has faded over time through the generations and disappeared because there is no context, no emotional or visceral events that can be internalized and carry over through time.

Hovering over any discussion of the persistence of memory is Sigmund Freud. And we know from his writings that the memories that are retained and remembered almost verbatim are often traumatic, and that the goal of therapy is often to address the memory in a way that can allow the trauma to be put to rest along with the ancestors.

And of course no discussion about memory would be complete without reference to the beloved petit madeline pastry that was the Marcel Proust's epic meditation on memory and what we remember:

"I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate, then a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that had happened to me. An exquisite pleasure invaded my senses..."

What is remembered over the generations then are not ideas, concepts, or abstract scientific or mathematical formulas but rather the things that speak to the sensory side and that we internalize. And I submit that the humble madeline is the link between memory and the parshiyah Titzaveh. The parshiyah of Tizaveh is no rote collection of mitzvot- when we read it carefully, it is both beautiful and brutal. Let's look at three sections:

1. The first is the Ephod: We have three full aliyot devoted to the details of the breastplate worn by the Kohen Gadol. The description is dazzling- with gold and jewels and precious, semi-precious stones carefully inlaid. There is nothing else quite like this description in the entire Torah. It is one of those sights that we used to call (giving age away here) as a Kodak moment. You just stood in awe of the beauty of the Ephod.
2. The second is the Slaughter of Bull: This is no ordinary recitation of offering up animal sacrifices that warrant a line or two for each festival listed in Deuteronomy in rote fashion. We have several Torah columns devoted in the most extreme detail, to the dismemberment of the bull and rams, what to do with the body parts, the entrails and what to do with the blood. This goes right to the sensory as well. It is messy.
3. The third is the incense altar layered with pure gold, with gold rims and rings and very specific directions for what can be burned as incense.

These are cinematic and are remembered because they reach us through the sensory part of our brains and we internalize them. They touch all of our senses.

So for a memory to have staying power, we first need something that drives through to the sensory part of our brains and allows us to retain it, even in distortion. And this brings us full circle back to Shabbat Zachor. The act of merely remembering what Amalek did to us, by itself, is not complete. We are commanded to take action to erase the name of Amalek and prevent recurrence of what Amalek did until the end of time.

We are not content with merely remembering the Shabbat as some long-expired event-

we must do something active to honor that memory to establish every seventh day a space where we are free from creativity and free to appreciate what we have accomplished over the previous six days. Whenever we stand and recite the Yizkor prayer at holidays in memory of beloved family members and friends, is it enough to merely remember? No. Recall the second sentence of every communal Yizkor prayer: We couple that communal memory with an act that will allow the best qualities of that person to remain alive-through acts of tzedaka. It is that call to action that inspires marathon runners we see on Commonwealth Avenue to endure months of training to raise research funds in memory of a lost friend or relative. Or as many in this room are keenly aware, to endure days training to ride a bicycle across Massachusetts every summer to raise cancer research funds to honor their memory. And it is that call to action that moved friends of Ken Schwartz after his death in 1994 to create a center in Boston dedicate to integrating compassion with caregiving. And it is a call that can move the Hanser-Teperow family, in the midst of grief over a loss, to create and support a living foundation to healing empowerment.

And what then is our call to action as we remember each year the cinematic events of Titzaveh and the ephod and slaughtering of the bull and rams? We try to recreate the beauty of our prayer service in this place. We transform the sacrifice of animals with the giving of ourselves to meaningful prayer service. We become closer in our own unique ways to God through tzedakah and giving.

Now Judaism is certainly not the only faith tradition that treasures memory, and it does not take long for a visitor to a catholic or protestant service or Buddhist temple, for example, to appreciate the central place that memory holds. But the lesson of Shabbat

Zachor for us is that memory by itself is not enough. It is what we actively do with our collective memories- whether to observe the Shabbat or blot out the name Amalek to prevent the recurrence of brutality- that is both our unique challenge and our responsibility as a people mitachas hashamiyim, until the end of time.

Shabbat Shalom