

Memories and Moving Forward

I've been thinking a lot about the phrase that says: "*What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember.*" Given its message, this phrase could have easily been written by our rabbis of old. However, its origin isn't Babylonia but Bogota, where it was coined by the Colombian literary giant -Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I've been thinking about memory because in the Torah, Rosh Hashanah is called *Yom Hazikaron* -the Day of Remembrance. In fact, nowhere is the term Rosh Hashanah used in the Torah. Only the Talmud refers to this day as Rosh Hashanah, as "the beginning of the year."

Zikaron or memory is a theme that is woven throughout our liturgy on this day of Remembrance. Before the *Amidah* we chant the familiar words –*zochreinu l'chaim, remember us for life*. And when we come to the shofar service with its three distinct components – we once again turn to remembrance. We pray that God filter our deeds and remember us through a lens of intimacy and compassion.

But what about our *own* memories? How do *we* remember as we reflect on the year that has passed? And how do these memories shape our thoughts and actions as we enter the New Year?

*How do the memories we hold as *individuals* affect our ability to move forward with healthy relationships?

*How does our *collective* memory, as Jews, inform the way in which we respond to the world around us?

*And finally, how do the ways in which we remember our history, as Americans, help us move forward as a society?

Memory is powerful. We can remember kindnesses done to us and seek to repay them; we can remember kindnesses *not* done to us and commit never to abandon those in need of love and kindness. But we can also remember past hurts and humiliations in the hopes of one day inflicting this suffering on those who harmed us. Memory can deepen empathy but it can also nurture antipathy; it can be redemptive, but it can also be profoundly toxic.

Perhaps you saw the new animated Disney movie, "Inside and Out" where four different aspects of our personality come to life, vying inside our head to create memories. In the movie, our happy selves, our fearful selves, our angry selves and our sad selves – are all part of the complex cast of characters determining how our memories take shape.

As I watched the movie, I couldn't help but think of these animated figures in terms of char-

acter traits or *middot*. *Middot* are the building blocks of the spiritual practice of *Mussar* –which many in our community are familiar with -given our focus on this practice over the past year. What if Amy Pohler -who did the voice-over for the “happy aspect” of our personalities had impersonated a character trait named *chesed* or loving-kindness? I kept thinking about the ways in which nurturing character traits - like humility, gratitude or loving-kindness - help us create a filter for our memories.

What would it be like to bring greater humility or compassion during these days, when we gather with friends and family, to relationships that test us?

What would it be like to hold on to that point of goodness –as small as it might be -that is in each person- rather than dwell on their negative traits?

While the quotient of sad vs. happy memories isn’t entirely in our hands, I believe that when we nurture these qualities we stand a much better chance of creating *memories* imbued with joy and sweetness.

Now, if we move from the *individual* to the *communal* realm – we see that our tradition is *keenly* aware of the power of memory and the ways in which *what we remember*, as Jews, informs *how* we respond to the world. Daily our prayers remind us of our experience as slaves and of the Exodus from Egypt. We are told not only what to remember but *how* to remember this experience.

Think of the four children of the Passover story. Who is the “wicked” one? It’s the one who can’t identify with the experience of oppression suffered by our ancestors and asks: “what does this service mean to *you*” and in this way excludes herself from the community. The whole point of the re-telling is to identify with what it *feels* like to be a stranger so that this memory can inform our response to the world today.

The Torah could have said: Since you were tyrannized and exploited and no one did anything to help you, you don’t owe anything to anyone; how dare anyone ask anything of you! But, instead, it chooses the opposite path. The Torah’s response is: since you were exploited and oppressed, you must never exploit or degrade others. And when others suffer this fate, remember: “you must love the stranger because you were once strangers.” Drawing on this collective memory and on more recent experiences –like that of our brothers and sisters in Europe 80 years ago, we *know* what our response must be.

Today, as hundreds of thousands of refugees risk their lives on boats, trains and trucks – flooding the nations of Central Europe, we know that we must support organizations like HIAS (formerly known as the Hebrew Immigrant Society) and the Jewish Coalition for Disaster Relief. And we know that we must demand *leadership* and *action* from the international community and from our own government leaders. As Jews we can never forget what it was like to be homeless refugees, just as we never forgot what it was like to be slaves in the land of Egypt.

What about as Americans? What *collective* memories inform our core narrative? Of course, there is more than one answer to this question. But given the events of this past year – given Charles-

ton and Baltimore, given the death of Eric Garner and Sandra Bland, I believe that today we are challenged to think deeply about *one* specific narrative and that is the narrative that surrounds the African-American experience.

Mr. Bryan Stevenson, a civil rights lawyer and the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, helped us do this when he came to our community this past spring. He is one of the most inspiring and informative speakers I have ever heard. If you didn't have a chance to hear him, I urge you to listen to his Ted talk or to read his book *Just Mercy*.

Mr. Stevenson spoke passionately about the need to revisit our civil rights narrative, which we currently tell as a three-part story with a clear-cut ending: We celebrate the courage of Rosa Parks, the accomplishments of Dr. Martin Luther King and the passage of the Civil Rights Act and with these three landmark moments we celebrate the end of racism. This way of *remembering*, says Mr. Stevenson, has kept us from confronting the legacy of slavery and the narrative of white supremacy. It has kept us from confronting the fact that the narrative of racial differences did not end when the slaves were emancipated.

But Mr. Stevenson also shared with us on a more personal level. He spoke about the important lesson he learned from his grandmother about *getting close*. When growing up, she would hug him so tightly that he could barely breathe and in that embrace she would say to him: "You can't understand most of the important things in life from a distance, Bryan, you have to get close." His work as a lawyer – has been all about getting close -to the condemned, to those who -often, have been unfairly judged.

Verna Myers, a well-known diversity expert who, like Bryan Stevenson, has used her Harvard Law Degree to help people confront racial bias also believes in "getting close." She has a TED talk directed at what she calls "well meaning people" - people like you and me, who don't think that they have any biases. But she challenges us with stories about the subconscious attitudes that we all hold.

She shares a story about a friend of hers – who is Asian American and, like her, a diversity expert. One day they are walking together late at night - they are lost, when they see a black man across the street. Myers is relieved to spot someone who she assumes will help them with directions but her friend, the diversity expert, is scared and yes, embarrassed about her reaction.

Ms. Myers' advice to all of us is this: "stop trying to be good people – be real people and confront your biases." In her Ted Talk she shows us pictures of awesome black men – literary figures, brave soldiers, inspiring preachers, famous scientists so that we can work on the implicit associations we have. And she challenges us to expand our circle, to have authentic relationships with people who are different from us - to get close.

Jews have in the past worked hard to do just that. In the 60's Jews were at the forefront of the fight against racism -marching together with Civil Rights leaders - inspired by our foundational story. Today, as we speak 200 Reform rabbis have joined the NAACP on a march from Selma to DC.

The march, which started August 1st and ends tomorrow, commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act and aims to bring attention to issues like economic inequality, education reform, criminal justice reform and voting rights. Accompanying the rabbis is a Torah, lovingly carried on this 860 mile Journey for Justice.....

Let us enter the New Year with a commitment to confront the biases that *continue* to exist in our society and within us. Members of the Brookline Clergy Association, of which I am a part, have come together to personally do this hard work. And our Social Action Group is committed to bringing opportunities for us, in *our* synagogue community, to engage with these issues. I believe it's about working to change hearts *as well as* working to change laws.

And let us also commit to finding ways in which – through acts of *chesed* and advocacy, we can channel the concern, skills and resources among us to do *our part* in responding to the Refugee crisis in Europe.

There is much work that needs to be done. And so, with an equal measure of humility and hope, I say: *Zochreinu l'chaim*. I choose to translate this plea -asking that God remember us for life as: *may we remember to live*. *May we remember* to live a life that makes a difference; a life committed to bringing *shlemut* or wholeness to our families, our community, our nation and our world.

And may this New Year bring *us* health and happiness.

Shana tova u'metuka.

