

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5779 - We Remember
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Two events transpired this summer that made me pause and reflect. One occurred on the night of July 28th. It was close to midnight and I opened the front door to let our dog, Idgy, into the yard. I looked up into the sky to find a large reddish celestial body staring back at me. I did a Google search for the proximity of Mars to earth, and found that between July 27-30 this year, Mars was nearly as close to earth as it has been in 60,000 years – just a mere 35 million miles away. Karen and I went back outside and marveled at the bright red/orange hue of our neighbor planet, a chance encounter in our 40 something years of life. Yet, nothing more than a common and reoccurring visit in the span of earth's 4 billion-year life span. In that moment, I reveled in my smallness, my insignificance compared to cosmic time.

The second event stands in stark contrast. This spring and summer Karen and I binge watched all six seasons of the *Wonder Years* with Itai and Yonah. The *Wonder Years* was a television show that aired during the late 1980's and early 1990's. I loved to watch it when I was growing up. The *Wonder Years* followed the life of a kid, Kevin Arnold, navigating the waters of friends, family, love, school, and the questions we wrestle with through our formative years. What made the *Wonder Years* unique was the voice of the narrator, an adult Kevin Arnold reflecting on those years, telling the story of his life, and gleaned the lessons found only through hindsight and wisdom. When I watched 30 years ago, I wondered what I would be like when I would become the age of the narrator.

Now, I had arrived, watching it with my sons the summer before they embark on their wonder years – Middle School, Bar Mitzvah, coming of age. At the end of the episode in which Kevin's best friend Paul becomes Bar Mitzvah, the show ends with a montage of black and white photos of the two young friends growing up as Simon and Garfunkel's "Bookends" plays in the background – (*sing*) "Time it was and what a time it was, a time of innocence, a time of confidences, long ago, it must be, long ago, I have a photograph, preserve your memories, they're all that's left you."

In preparing for the High Holidays, I have been thinking about these two experiences from summer, one of unfathomable time; a sense that we are truly nothing more than cosmic light that flickers and then fades against a vast canvas of the universe. In this sense, does the universe and time even take note of our existence? The other experience reminds us that our lives, however short, are marked by profound significance in our relationships, our emotions, and our memories. Rosh Hashanah embodies these two impulses. We behold God as the creator of the world. God is great and we are small. As our liturgy will remind us in the *Unetaneh Tokef*, we are nothing more than a blade of grass that will fade, a cloud passing by, a particle blown by the wind. Yet in that same prayer, we know that God accounts for and numbers every soul. Our lives do matter, and our actions leave a legacy.

Like the planet, Mars, coming full circle to get a closer look at earth, once again we enter the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah as the orbit of our lives comes full circle. We stand in close proximity to our very existence to reflect on the time of our lives, as we seek to imbue our days with meaning. Rosh Hashanah compels us to remember, to reconstruct our past so that we might be inscribed for blessing in the Book of Life as we enter the New Year. Rosh Hashanah is *Yom HaZikaron*, the day of remembrance. As we enter the period of intense reflection, I want to consider what makes memory a foundational Jewish value through three questions. What is memory, and more specifically, what makes for Jewish memory? How does memory help us to face our suffering and our joy? How does memory help us to build the future?

The Hasidic master, the Baal Shem Tov taught that in remembrance is the secret of redemption. This teaching feels intuitively Jewish. Memory is a mitzvah. It appears in the 10 Commandments, “Remember Shabbat and keep it holy.” We remember we were slaves in Egypt, the central message of the Passover. Our tradition teaches that we all stood together at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. Remember being there? In generations after the Holocaust, the imperative of memory looms large over all of Jewish life. We remember lest we forget, and “never again fades,” and the darkest chapter of history repeats itself. Our tradition understands how transformative memory is in shaping our lives.

Scientists, philosophers, and historians all underscore memory’s transformative power. Neurologist Eric Kandel calls memory “the glue that holds our mental life together.” Not only do we rely on memory to recall even the most basic things we learned, like not to touch a hot stove, memory physically changes our brains. Accumulating memories, and the kinds of memories we have, grow and alter the synapses that send messages in our brains. And many of us know from personal experience in our families how diseases of dementia physically alter the brain, erasing memory and ultimately sense of self.

Philosopher Avishai Margalit calls memory the “cement that holds thick relations together, and communities of memory are the obvious habitat for thick relations (*The Ethics of Memory*).” As an ethicist, what Margalit means by thick relations include our connections to others governed by love, family, loyalty, and ultimately another who is in a shared community of memory. Sitting around the Passover table, sharing in the glow of the Chanukah menorah, being counted among community to hear the call of the shofar – all reinforce memories that bind each of us in this room to one another and the Jewish people.

And historian Yehuda Kurtzer views memory through a lens of purpose and meaning. In his *book Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past*, Kurtzer distills memory into the act of making the past purposeful. For Kurtzer, the act of memory, of making the past purposeful, transcends simply our survival as Jews, but is responsible for our ability to thrive. Yet, Kurtzer goes on to identify something even more important about memory and its purpose as meaning maker. Memory can help us to make sense of cognitive dissonance in our lives, when the reality that we expect to happen and what

we want to happen does not always pan out. This is why memory has been so important collectively for the Jewish people. Our understanding of self has been based on a covenant with God in which we will be a great nation. And yet, the covenant has been tested through ages with destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, wandering and exile. In remembering the ruptures of the Jewish past, we hold onto the memory that our covenant with God and one another is eternal, leading eventually as the Baal Shem Tov taught, to redemption.

When we celebrate the Jewish holidays, we enter processes of collective memory transforming our brains, shaping our behavior and sense of ethical duty, and forming connections of shared meaning. But Rosh Hashanah adds a parallel layer. It involves a deeply personal act of memory. We do not only spend time recalling moments of the Jewish past, we revisit the stories of our lives. This reflection invites our second question: How does memory help us to face our suffering and our joy? As we consider this question, permit me to share two brief memories from my own life, one of suffering and one of joy.

I remember my first experience of suffering. I was five years old and my parents sat my younger brother and me down at the kitchen table to tell us that they were getting a divorce. They did their best to explain to me what that would mean, that they would no longer be living together, but that they loved us and that this change in our family was not because of us. I remember hot tears streaming down my face as the world as I knew it was shifting under me. And only as an adult can I imagine the contours of the experience that do not belong to me, the feelings of sadness and helplessness of my parents knowing that they were causing me pain. And yet, this experience of rupture has become reframed in my memory by other memories added in subsequent years, memories that have mended the tears. When I was eight my father met a wonderful woman, my step-mother, also recently divorced with two kids, a boy and girl, a year and four years older than me. When they married, I gained a 2nd mom, and two new siblings. This first memory of suffering is part of a larger story of my identity that has shaped who I am.

In retrospect, I can look back and understand that what I felt as I five-year old eventually receded. But, suffering does not leave our lives. We carry it with us. It is intensely personal. Some suffering occurs in the emotional and psychological struggles of daily life. Others have experienced suffering that is unthinkable, suffering that takes your breath away, suffering that awakens you in the morning and is your last thought when you go to sleep. And still, remembering can be the secret to redemption, to coping, surviving, and hopefully overcoming.

Few know this better than Victor Frankel, psychologist and Holocaust survivor. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankel writes, "We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life when confronted with a hopeless situation...For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph...When we are no longer able to change a situation...we are challenged to change ourselves." At this season, memory is a holy

portal to meaning. We sift through painful memories, some foisted upon us not by our choosing, and some which could have been avoided, were it not for our shortcomings. And through these memories we hope to change ourselves.

Beyond suffering, moments of joy also punctuate our lives. I remember my first experience of joy; not amusement park joy, but the kind of joy that makes you feel whole and fulfilled. I was fourteen years old spending summer at Camp Swig, the Reform Jewish summer camp where I grew up under the Redwood trees of northern California. During one Friday night Shabbat song session, I felt an overwhelming sense of oneness as the entire dining hall sang together. Arm in arm, we poured our souls into the song, the 126th psalm, *Shir Hama'alot*, "when God restores us to Zion it will be as if we are in a dream and our mouths will be filled with laughter and song." Friendship, connection, community, and soulfulness mingle in that memory of joy. This memory stands out as personally formative and Jewishly meaningful, one moment that would help define future life choices of communities I would seek, and the calling I would one day choose. Recollections give us hope and encourage us to live in realms of wholeness and fulfillment. These happy memories also put moments of suffering in context, becoming a foundation of faith and resilience in the face of life's burdens.

The more I think about the teaching of the Baal Shem Tov, that in memory is the secret of redemption, I come to the conclusion that memory is really not about the past. Memory is about the present and the future. Moments of the present constantly transform and evolve into the snapshots of past times and places. We are aware, or ought to be aware, of our place and proximity, to others, to our loved ones, to our community, to our society. How we chose to live, what we chose to prioritize will be the memories that are left us. Will we really remember that text or email coming in? The work and minutiae of daily life, while important, must also be resisted in order to answer the larger question, is this what I want to remember? Ultimately, is this how I want to be remembered?

The present is making a choice about shaping our future, and as a result building the memories of how we will have arrived at that future. The biblical matriarch Ruth, the Moabite woman who is considered the first convert spoke these indelible words to her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi, "Wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, your God, my God (Ruth 1:16)." That moment of choice has become memory for our people. The choice she made in that moment points to redemption. Ruth would become the great grandmother of King David, the embodiment of the promise of the Jewish future.

So, what path will we chose in the year ahead and where do we want that path to lead? What places will we inhabit, some by choice and some through life's unexpected changes? Who will be our people? Will we worship false gods of narrow, petty concern, or the God of time and space who asks that we strive for eternity, connection, vision, and wisdom?

I will leave you with one of my favorites stories about memory. It is taught that while we grow in the womb, waiting to enter this world, an angel teaches us everything we will need to know about this life. As we are born, the angel touches us just above our lip causing us to forget all the life lessons of the womb. We carry with us the indentation of the angel's touch.

As we live, we reconstruct, we put back together, we re-member what the angel had taught us. Memory becomes the bridge to finding ourselves again in this world. As Jews, we are enfolded in a community of memory. The Jewish process of re-telling and re-visiting the past can be a template for coping with our own personal triumphs and catastrophes. Memory gives us the opportunity to construct meaning in our lives through moments of suffering and joy. The meaning we assign our memory leads to understanding who we are, and more importantly, who we wish to be. And the memories we make for tomorrow form in each singular day. Right now is nothing more than a memory waiting to be. May we enter 5779 born to a new year of life, a new year of making precious memories. May all of our memories be for a blessing.