

Zakhor: Remembering Those Who No Longer Can Parashat B'shalach

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There were these two elderly people living down here in Florida. Stanley was a widower and Sylvia was a widow. They had known each other for a number of years. Now, one evening there was a community dinner at the big activity center. Stanley and Sylvia were seated at the same table, across from one another and as the meal went on, Stanley made a few admiring glances at Sylvia and finally gathered up his courage to ask her, "Will you marry me?" After about six seconds of careful consideration, she answered, "Yes. Yes, I will."

The meal ended with a few more pleasant exchanges and they went to their respective condos. The next morning, Stanley was troubled. "Did she say 'yes' or did she say 'no?'" For the life of him, he couldn't remember. Try as he would, he just could not recall. With much trepidation, he went to the phone and called her.

First, he explained to her that he didn't remember as well as he used to. Then he reviewed the lovely evening. As he gained a little more courage, he then inquired of her, "When I asked if you if you would marry me, did you say 'yes' or did you say 'no?'" He was delighted to hear Sylvia say, "Why, I said, 'Yes, yes I will' and I meant it with all my heart." Then she continued, "And I am so glad that you called, because I couldn't remember who had asked me!"

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In this morning's Torah portion, Parshat B'shalach, we read of the Israelites battle with the nation of Amalek. At the end of this war when Joshua and our ancestors overwhelm the Amalekites with the sword, the Lord says, "*Inscribe this in a document as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.*" Later on in the Torah, we are commanded to remember what Amalek did to our ancestors in the dessert. This, of course, is not the only thing we as Jews are directed to remember. In fact, much of our religion is based on *zakhor*, remembrance.

Our tradition values memory. Indeed our calendar year begins with memory. Rosh Hashanah is known as Yom Hazikaron – the Day of Remembrance. God remembers our actions and so too must we. Individual memory. And Pesach, which is in the first month of the Jewish calendar according to the Torah, is a holiday in remembrance of our ancestors' exodus from the slavery of Egypt. In each generation, we recite, individuals have the obligation to see themselves as if they too were part of that exodus. Communal memory. This Monday will be Martin Luther King, Jr. Day – a day not only for remembering the civil rights leader, but also for remembering his message, his vision, and his dream. As Jews, we must remember not only our plight for civil rights, but the plight of all people who have faced discrimination.

We have modern holidays as well in which memory is the central act. Yom Hazikaron, Israel's annual day commemorating those who lost their lives fighting for our Jewish homeland. And of course, "zakhor" is a word that has come to be associated with Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day. As if these once a year official times of communal memory were not enough, each week we bring in Shabbat with the words of kiddush – zikaron l'ma'aseh v'reishit (that God has lovingly gifted the holy Sabbath to us as a memory of Creation). And zekher l'tziat mitzrayim (Shabbat is the first such day of assembly in which we, as the Jewish people, remember the exodus from Egypt).

We have ritual items to help jog our memory. We can't walk into our home without seeing a mezuzah on the doorpost, reminding us of the mitzvot contained in the Shema. The fringes of the tallit, the tzitzit, bear witness to the 613 positive and negative commandments. And the boxes of the tefillin are totafot, reminders of our heart- and head-responsibilities in this world. Menorahs, sukkot, matzah all stand to remind us of our collective history as the Jewish people.

The word *yizkor* is also from the Hebrew word *zakhor*. Four times a year, on Yom Kippur and on the three pilgrimage festivals, we recite the *yizkor* service formally memorializing our relatives who no longer walk the earth with us. Remember! Think of all the major events in history we know we must remember. Remember the Alamo! Never forget the Holocaust lest it be repeated! Keep the victims of September 11 in your memory!

Memory has become a major industry in our society if you think about it. We used to spend ten bucks a year on a nice wall or desk calendar so we didn't forget our appointments. Eventually, maybe we upgraded and purchased some fancy inserts for our leather attaché or Franklin planner. Now, millions of people around the world carry a personal digital assistant – a handheld computer – with them to remember their schedules, phone numbers, birthdays and anniversaries, and daily tasks. We're willing to spend a lot of money to remember. We buy books and vitamins that we think will help us improve our memory. We journal. We write diaries. We file letters and birthday cards. We create mnemonics like cute little rhymes or songs to remember things. We put up little sticky square pieces of yellow paper by the backdoor to remind us to buy more yellow sticky pieces of paper! And of course, the latest fad? We all have to have the best digital cameras to preserve our experiences and help us remember them, and then e-mail everyone else those photos so that they will remember our experiences too. Because, of course, in the end, as we all say, all we have left is our memories.

But this is not true for all of us. God commands us to "remember" some one hundred times in the Torah and yet there is a segment of our population who, much as they may want to, cannot remember. Let's not even talk about remembering what Amalek did to us millennia ago, I'm talking about not being able to remember your grandchildren's names. Or their faces. I'm talking about not remembering which city you live in. Or on which street. Or in which house. I'm talking about Alzheimer's disease.

I must confess that as a child of the 80s, much of what I know about Alzheimer's disease comes as a result of former president Reagan's very difficult decision to make his health a public matter. It was November 4, 1995 that President Reagan courageously announced his illness to the American people. He wrote, "...we feel it is important to share it with you. In opening our hearts, we hope this might promote greater awareness of this condition. Perhaps it will encourage a clearer understanding of the individuals and families who are affected by it." He also understood that the victims of Alzheimer's disease include not only the patients, but also the caregivers. He continued, "Unfortunately, as Alzheimer's disease progresses, the family often bears a heavy burden. I only wish there was some way I could spare Nancy from this painful experience. When the time comes, I am confident that with your help she will face it with faith and courage."

The textbook definition of Alzheimer's disease is that it is a degenerative disease of the brain from which there is no recovery. Slowly and inexorably, the disease attacks nerve cells in all parts of the cortex of the brain, as well as some surrounding structures, thereby impairing a person's abilities to govern emotions, recognize simple mistakes they've made, coordinate their movements, and remember things well. Eventually, an afflicted person loses all memory and mental functioning.

Alzheimer's is now the fourth leading cause of death in adults with almost twelve million victims worldwide and a third of those are in the U.S. Without effective methods for prevention and treatment, the disease will reach epidemic proportions within fifty years time. The Alzheimer's Association estimates that one in ten American families has a loved one with Alzheimer's disease. Perhaps the most startling statistic is that about half of all people in nursing homes today have Alzheimer's.

I was recently sitting in the waiting room at the doctor's office when I couldn't help but overhear a conversation between an elderly couple. She was chiding him for not remembering the reason they were at the doctor's office. "Murray, don't you know why you're here?" She demanded. "Don't you know that you come to this doctor's office every three months for your injection? Murray, please tell me you know why you're here! Listen to me. Why are you here? Tell me!" I must confess, I was immediately outraged at the way this wife was treating her husband, who so obviously to me was suffering from some form of dementia or senility, and very likely Alzheimer's. But then I remembered what I had learned about caregivers. I recognized that I am not in her shoes dealing with her beloved partner's memory loss on a daily basis.

Alzheimer's caregivers have their own issues as well. You can imagine how frustrated and overwhelmed they must feel being responsible for someone whom they love so much and yet who no longer recognizes them. I know there are many caregivers in our community and I have the utmost amount of admiration for you. We understand that as Alzheimer's disease caregivers you often feel a sense of disconnect. You should know that we have many resources available for caregivers. Synagogues, community center social workers, and hospitals all have trained professionals who can lend assistance to the caregivers.

There are many things that we, in the community, can do for our fellow congregants who are suffering from this dreadful disease and for their caregivers. First and foremost, we can do one of the most meaningful mitzvot and that is bikkur cholim, visiting the sick. Bikur Cholim is certainly not a task solely for the rabbi, cantor, or hospital chaplain. It is upon each of us to perform this duty. Some practical things we can do include showing videos or photo albums of family members and events from the patient's past. We can play familiar games with them, and take them for a ride in the neighborhood reminding them of the places they once frequented. As we know well from our liturgy, music has the wonderful power to elicit memories. We can sing songs with the patient or make a tape of some holiday songs or prayer services. You can also take a pet on a visit, have the kids make an art project, or join the synagogue's clown crew.

And if you know of a caregiver who has errands to run, you can offer to stay with the relative for a short while giving the caregiver a chance to get out. It is also important to reach out to the caregiver, spending time with them, and reminding them of the invaluable gift they are giving their loved one through their selfless act.

So much of our religion is presupposed by an ability to remember. The Psalmist writes, "If I forget thee O Jerusalem, may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth." It is my sincere hope that the Psalmist was unaware of dementia.

Write this for a memorial in a book, and read it to Joshua; I will utterly blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. God seems to understand that we might not always remember Amalek without a memory device, so he commissions Moses to write about Amalek in a book as a memorial. We cannot risk Moses forgetting what he was supposed to tell Joshua, can we?

We all joke about having "senior moments." There are times we run downstairs only to forget why it was that we went downstairs. And we know there was something else we needed from the store; we just can't for the life of us remember what it was. We all sometimes forget the names of familiar faces. But this is called forgetfulness. Alzheimer's disease is a serious ailment that affects a great many of us in our community. As Jews, we have the mitzvah, the commandment, obligating us to remember Amalek and erase its name; perhaps the real mitzvah is for us to remember those whose memory has become erased.

Shabbat Shalom.