

# Recollection, Memory, and Hope

A sermon delivered by  
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At a public forum that featured a priest, minister, and rabbi, the early items on the agenda took more time than the master of ceremonies intended. So he went to the priest and asked if he would shorten his remarks. The priest replied that he would cut out a paragraph from his speech. When he went to the minister, she replied that she would cut a whole page from her speech. Then he went to the rabbi who replied, "I'll just talk faster."

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To all of you: this night and all of these days of the *Yamim Noraim* are moments in time when the Rabbi wants to share everything in his heart, use each moment as a moment to teach, and spend every possible minute preaching, preaching, and preaching. But that cannot be done. A sermon has to be pruned and shaped into remarks that will preach, teach, challenge and move the congregation, but not without end.

Some suggest that on Yom Kippur the words should be filled with *Nechemta* -- words of comfort and kindness -- for that is what the people need on such a night. Others propose that the rabbi's words should be filled with *Toch'ch'cha* -- words filled with chastisement to a community that has gone astray from its values, from its core, from the words of Torah.

In some years the words come easily; there is a war, or tragedy, or a major event that affects everyone in the community. You and I have certainly shared in many of them over the years. And some years are for teaching, learning about the words in the Machzor and what they should mean for us on this precious day in our lives. For me, those have been years to speak with you about the meaning of Kol Nidre, about Jonah, about some of the special prayers that have been recited by our people for over a thousand years.

Tonight, I want to speak with you simply about three things: They are recollection, memory, and hope. I have chosen them because I believe that they should be the core values of our prayers for this Yom Kippur. Somehow, each of us should consider these three ideas as we recite our prayers, as we read the words on the page of our prayerbook, as we hear the sounds of the melodies sung by the Cantor and our Choir. For through recollection, memory, and hope we may just find that this Yom Kippur will

be one in which our hearts, our minds, and our souls may truly be moved to create a good and new year.

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In his book entitled *Zachor: Jewish history and Jewish Memory*, scholar Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi tells us a story about a man whose world had been shattered. During World War II at the Battle of Smolensk,

... this man had been shot in the head. Though he survived, he had lost most of his memory, his very capacity to remember. By sheer force of will and with incredible effort he began to write, a few sentences each day, over a period of some twenty-five years. Slowly, painfully, he was able to recover fragments of his past and even to arrange them in some meaningful order. But while this activity gave him a tenuous link to life, normal living was denied him. At one point he cries out: "I remember nothing, absolutely nothing! Just separate bits of information ... but that's all! I have no real knowledge of any subject. My past has just been wiped out."

My friends, recollection is the ability to recall, to collect, to gather, to assemble again. To recollect means to recover knowledge that was transmitted or events that have transpired, but that now need to be gathered again in order for them to be part of our present. You and I come to this synagogue on this night to recollect and recall all that we are, all that we have been, in order to understand who we shall be in the year ahead.

There is a Midrash that I love to share with the children in our school, especially when they ask me why they have to learn. I remind them that according to Jewish tradition, when they were in their mother's womb they were given the entire Torah. But at the very moment of their birth, an angel came and slapped them right here (or perhaps the angel kissed them here), and at that moment they forgot everything and now have to recollect, they have to learn it all over again.

I think the same about recollection when I think of you and me. How many of us can recall the moments of our youth, the days when we lived in our parents home, when they shared with us their stories or the stories of their parents? How powerful those recollections should be for all of us. And yet, I sometimes think that we only recall fragments of the stories, little details or anecdotes, but not the meaning and the power of those events in the lives of our ancestors or family members.

How often I have heard detailed stories of grandparents or great grandparents who made the dangerous journey from the old world to this world in order to be free or because they were fleeing persecution or economic deprivation. Who among us here has not heard such personal stories of loved ones or read such stories in the volumes of books

that have been written or the movies that we have seen about such acts of courage; or the stories of dear ones who faced tragedy or illness or job loss? As you relate such stories I often feel that you share little more than recollections, recalling parts of the story but seldom articulating the message and the meaning of such personal events that should transform our lives.

I'll use a few personal recollections to explain what I mean. My grandmother was a tough business woman who lived over the hardware store that she owned and ran. But she was also an enormously proud Jew; she belonged to many Jewish organizations and served as Tzedakah collector among her friends. In the synagogue in which I grew up she provided the funds for our Temple's Memorial Tablet. When it was erected on the wall just outside the sanctuary, the first two names were those of my grandfather and father, with a reserved one in between. It was many years later that her own name would be affixed to that special spot. The truth is that my grandmother was far from among the wealthiest members of the congregation but she was always among the ones with an open pocketbook, ready to give and give generously to Jewish causes, to the needy. I will always be grateful to her for teaching me the meaning of supporting the Jewish community and helping others in need.

My own mother, who was with us last week for Rosh Hashannah, taught me the meaning of facing adversity with dignity and never thinking that you are poor. She was a young widow with a child and they were about to lose her home. Her own mother, my Bubbie, moved in with us, and we took in a "border" who occupied my room while I slept on a pullout couch in my mother's bedroom. By doing this, my mother didn't lose her house, the mortgage was paid, and there was never a day or a night without food on the table or clothes on our back. I probably can recollect lots of moments in our family's life, but most of all I recall her dignity, her voice in the Temple choir, and her pride in always being a dues paying member of her Temple, even when she couldn't afford it.

In recent years so many of you have share sad stories of dealing with parents who suffer from Alzheimers or dementia. So many of you have shared with me your own fears of possibly having to endure a life where the events of the past can no longer be recalled, where names are forgotten, places and events simply wiped out. Recollection is the act of trying to bring back that which has been forgotten, that which no longer speaks to us and enables us to have a past. We should recollect those moments that are important and share them with family members while we can, before they become forgotten and we lose them forever.

This place, this time, this event – they are filled with powerful recollections – recollections of a community of Jews who proudly sought to establish a congregation that would transmit the values of past generations of Jews to the generations of the future. The names of loved ones inscribed throughout our building should represent more than just their having lived; such inscriptions should represent the principles and ideals for which they stood. As we recollect the meaning of their lives, we should be able to say of them, "this one taught me the meaning of kindness, this one showed me how to be gracious in

the midst of family turmoil, this one was my mentor who taught me how to be generous and live a life of dignity, this one taught me how to live as a Jew and I will forever be grateful” I pray that this night be one filled with recollections that restore to each of us the meaning of our lives as Jews, the story of our people and its journey, the promise of a tomorrow based on a recalled past.

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And the second idea I would ask us to consider is memory. Memory: not just the ability to recall facts, but the synthesizing of facts and impressions in order to make sense out of the world in which we live.

Czech philosopher Gustav Meyrink once wrote: “When knowledge comes, memory comes too, little by little. Knowledge and memory are one and the same thing.” For us as Jews, memory is what leads to knowledge, which is what makes them the same. To have memory as a Jew is to do more than simply recollect events and time and place. Memory is to bring together such moments and derive understanding. That is why the creation of memory is so important for us. Each time we take out the Torah we recreate the moment at Sinai when God spoke and we listened. That is why we say, “who shall go up to the mountain of the Lord, and who shall stand in God’s holy place?”

The Passover Seder is one of the most memorable experiences in the life of every Jew. We sit at the table and retell our story of going from bondage to freedom. But the truth is that we re-experience the story, and in so many ways. I assume that each one of us here has vivid memories of Passover Seders. They should represent a powerful part of our lives.

You see, for Jews, the building of memory is really what our faith is all about. For through such memory we establish our true belief, and we choose how to act out such belief. If all of your life you have come to the synagogue on these awesome days and sat in the same seats and listened to the same music and recited the same prayers – the memory of all of this undoubtedly has a powerful impact on your life. But there should be even more to your memory, which is your memory as a Jew. To have memory as a Jew is to recall the moment you became Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah. Not to remember some glitzy party celebrated in your honor, but a moment in the life of our community when you ascended this Bimah and declared, ‘I am now an adult Jew, I take on the responsibilities and privileges of Jewish life, to be included in the Minyan, to be a giver of ts’dakkah, to perform gemilut chasadim, acts of loving kindness.

For Jews memory is about that first visit to someone in the hospital. Memory is about the first time I purchased an Israel Bond or received an Israel Bond from my grandparents. For us, memory is represented by the first tree we planted in Israel or the first time we recall receiving a certificate that someone planted a tree in our honor. And for each of us, memory is, I hope, about sitting at the table study a Jewish text with our rabbi and discovering so much about life from the conversation and discussion that took place between us.

Here's a powerful example of memory. Some years ago I was sitting in the living room of the Rabbanit Kappach. She is a woman now in her eighties, the widow of Rabbi Kappach of the Yemenite quarter of Jerusalem. Every day, hundreds of people stop by the Rabbanit's home. Some give her food, flour, sugar, sandwiches, money. Others stop and receive food, flour, sugar, sandwiches, money. It is extraordinary to see. She also provides dowries and wedding gowns for poor brides, sometimes actually making the entire wedding. And on Passover, she collects Passover staples that fill the entire gymnasium of the school near her home until she and her army of volunteers distribute the food to poor Jewish families so that they can celebrate a kosher Passover each year.

I asked the rabbanit, "Why do you do all of this and where did you learn it?" And she told me, "When I was eight years old my father handed me a package of food and said, "Go to the building next door and place this package at the door of the family in apartment number two. Knock on the door and leave before they can see you. It is a memory I have carried with me all of my life."

You and I need such memories to help us understand the meaning of life. Our memories should be of vivid experiences that inculcate in us those powerful messages of Jewish living. That is why your children are invited to bring Ts'dakkah or Keren Ami to the Temple each time that they come to Religious school. It is why we take them to Washington DC to learn about applying Jewish values to the work of our government. It is why we encourage them to spend time in Israel and why I constantly encourage and implore you to go to Israel and to take your children to Israel. For there, in Israel, significant memories will be created that will tie you and them to Israel, to Jewish life, to our people, for years and years to come. Shall I ask who is going with me next year? It is a memory that will carry you and your family in ways I cannot even begin to describe. I pray that the memories of our encounters with Jewish life will be indelibly inscribed in the books of our life so that our days on earth will be transformed into days of sacred living, days that our children and grandchildren will cherish as being blessed.

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And lastly, I wish to speak of hope. Hope is the ability to feel or believe that what is desired may very well happen. You and I are a people of hope. Our Torah tells us that we are the descendants of Abraham and Sarah who were given a promise by God that one day their children and grandchildren would inherit a land and become a blessing to all of humanity. Regardless of our experience, no matter where we have lived, no matter how we have survived or how others have attempted to destroy us we have always found ways to hope, to believe that the original promise would be carried out. That same promise seemed broken so many times but we never lost hope, nor do we lose hope now. Tyrants and despots like those who visit the UN in New York may come and go but the hope for our dream fulfilled will never be diminished. Young people may assimilate or even lose their way to Jewish life, but our hope will continue to remain strong that our people will always weather the storms of living and continue to thrive.

Our hope is strong and vital because we have recollections of our past and memories of days of old. It is a glorious synthesis of this reality infused every day by the renewal of the sparks of Jewish life and by a stubborn and principled refusal to give in to cynicism and despair. It is embodied in the words of our People's anthem: *Kol Od Balevav p'nimah*, So long as still within the inmost heart of a Jewish spirit sings, *Od lo avdah tikvateynu*, our hope will never be diminished.

My dear congregation, on this night of Kol Nidre I pray that you will never lose hope. I pray that you and I will recollect a past that is rich and full of meaning; and I pray that together we will create memories for those who follow us so that every tomorrow will be filled with light, with promise, and with a future precious to behold.