

The Power of Selective Memory

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A few months ago, as many of you know, my grandmother, Nona, as we lovingly called her, passed from this world. My grandmother suffered from dementia for the last ten years of her life. In many ways, our family's most painful moments of mourning occurred years ago, at each and every family *simcha*. Though she was alive at those joyous occasions – among them, weddings, graduations, and births – she simply couldn't attend, and worst yet, for the most part, she wasn't able to fully comprehend either.

During certain visits, Nona referred to me as "Rabbi" mainly because of my (so called) beard and *kippah*. And yet, at those very moments she didn't realize that it was I, her own grandson, who was the rabbi. Though she met our oldest son, she failed to recognize that this precious child was her own great grandson. She was alive, and yet her disease had somehow left her behind.

My Nona however did remember a few select things.

She always recognized her children, my father and his brother. She remembered her parents and spoke vividly about them. At times she reverted back to solely speaking in Yiddish, the language of her childhood, a language that fell almost entirely into disuse among her family after the Shoah. She did remember the war, as she called the Holocaust. For her, there was only one war.

There were also habitual phrases and blessings, for health, for children, for *nachas*. These expressions very much defined who she was before the onset of her dementia. They were so deeply rooted in her soul that no disease could ever take them away from her.

For my grandmother, the present freely mingled with the past. Her selective memory lifted the barriers of time and in her constantly shifting time zone the past was more present than the present tense itself.

During this last period of my grandmother's life, our interactions, difficult as they were, often left me musing about memory and time. Indeed, after each visit I found myself wondering anew: Why do we remember certain things more than others? And in what ways do those memories animate the way we lead our lives in the present?

This morning, I would like to explore these questions a little bit further, especially in light of the *Zichronot*, or remembrance section, in today's Mussaf service.

To begin, allow me to offer a minor observation.

We all suffer from selective memory.

Our pasts are full of essential details, transformative stories, and impactful relationships. And yet, even our most critical memories are not part of every moment of our life. Some of our memories are only recalled once or twice and never again. For the most part, despite being essential, our memories are dormant, until suddenly, at a certain moment, they are resurrected; they become once again alive.

We however are not the only ones suffering from selective memory. Our Torah teaches that God, the Holy One, *kivyachol* (as it were), suffers from selective memory as well.

A few brief examples will suffice.

Yesterday's Torah reading recounted how God remembered Sarah – "*Va'Hashem pakad et Sarah.*" After years of forgetfulness, God finally remembers Sarah by fulfilling His promise with the blessing of offspring.

Similarly, the remembrance section in today's Mussaf service, recounts how God remembered Noah after the flood, "*Vayizkor Elohim et Noach.*" After wiping out the inhabitants of the world, God suddenly remembers Noah. The rain stops and the water subside.

In the *Zichronot* section, God also remembers the people of Israel in Egypt: "*Vayizkor Elohim et Brito.*" God remembers the covenant He had made with our ancestors, the promise He had made to redeem our people from Egyptian bondage.

The claim in each of these Biblical verses – that God had suddenly remembered Noah, or Sarah, or His covenant with our people – is quite frankly astounding. Had it not be written in the Torah, had Moses not said it himself, then we would never have had the audacity to make such a claim ourselves!

Is forgetting or forgetfulness even a possibility for God such that we can speak of God's remembrance or God's memory?

Rav Soloveitchik offers an important insight. He notes that the concluding blessing for the Mussaf's Remembrance section is formulated in the present tense. God is "*Zocher haBrit.*" According to the Rav, this particular conjugation indicates that God in fact remembers at all times; God's memory is continuous, ever-present. Rav Soloveitchik explains, "Memory as an attribute of God cannot connote a psychological process. It must rather be understood as transcendental, denoting not remembrance of the past but its presence, its perennial existence, and everlasting reality. The covenant with Abraham does not lie in a dead past, but in a living present. At the same time, agreements entered into, obligations assumed, promises made, and objectives formulated by the father of the nation remain valid and binding. For us too, then,

this is not just a simple remembrance; it is rather a re-acceptance, a re-experience. Just as Abraham represented us, we represent him” (R. J. B. Soloveitchik, *Emergence of Ethical Man*, pp. 174-175).

The Rav’s commentary is instrumental in delineating two types of memory. The first type of memory concerns itself with the past for its own sake. It looks at history, collects objective data and facts. In contrast, the second type of memory focuses on the past out of a primary concern for the present. In this mode, the relevance of a memory is determined solely by its relationship to the present tense. Subjective meaning transcends and overrides objective, historical data. It is the meaning of the memory, and how that meaning resonates in the present tense, that lends new life to that very memory in present time.

The expression “God remembered” must be understood through this second category, and not the first one. God is not an historian or an archeologist, in the simple sense. God does not remember or dwell in an objective past. Rather, there are parts of the past that are so integral to the present, that they ‘live on’ in God’s everlasting reality.

Midrash Vayikra Rabbah offers a similar insight on another verse quoted in today’s section of *Zichronot*, of Remembrance.

We read in the book of Leviticus (26:42), “I have recalled my covenant with Jacob, even my covenant with Isaac, and even my covenant with Abraham I will remember” – “*Ve’zacharti et beriti Yaakov, ve’af et beriti Yitzchak, ve’af et beriti Avraham ezkor.*” The Midrash brilliantly asks, “Why does the verse mention memory with respect to Jacob and Abraham, but not with respect to Isaac?” Listen to the verse yet again, “I have recalled (*Ve’zacharti*) my covenant with Jacob, even my covenant with Isaac (but here the verse fails to mention memory explicitly as it did before!), and even my covenant with Abraham I will remember (*ezkor*).” Our rabbis then answer, “God sees the ashes of Isaac as if they were gathered on the altar before Him.”

The binding of Isaac, today's Torah reading, a binding which forms the basis for the covenantal relationship between God and Isaac, is a memory not of the past, but rather it is a moment of everlasting significance. The famous Israeli philosopher and Talmudist, Rav Shagar z"l noted, "This is not an occurrence from the past, but rather has been inscribed forever in God's present." (Rav Shagar, *The Human and the Infinite*, p. 65). God does not need to remember Isaac, because that memory is alive with God.

The midrash makes a radical and critical claim. God's covenant with Isaac bears greater relevance to the present tense than God's separate covenants with Abraham and Jacob. We are not here because Abraham went on a personal voyage, nor are we here because Jacob gave life to our nation. We are here because in every generation, parents bind their children to the presence of God, to His Torah, and to His commandments. Abraham's journey would have come to its end had Abraham not been able to bind Isaac to his path. Similarly, Jacob would not have given life to our nation had his father, Isaac, not exemplified for him the depth of sacrifice needed to assure continuity from one generation to another.

The binding of Isaac is not a story of the past. Rather, the binding of Isaac is the reason for the present.

Just as God, *kivyachol* (as it were), remembers certain aspects of the past, because those certain aspects of the past live on with God due to their supreme relevance to the present, so too, we as a nation, as a collective, remember certain aspects of the past through the lives that we lead in the present. In other words, there are parts of the past that are so integral to our present as a people that they 'live on' in Israel's everlasting reality

Now, if that is true for God, and if it is true for us as a people, as a nation, then it must also apply for each one of us as individuals.

I would like now to address the profound power of our selective memory.

Today, on Rosh HaShanah, a day which is also aptly called, *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance, each one of us can determine which memories to leave in the past and which memories to perpetuate in the present through the ways we lead our lives.

In regards to the past, our question is quite simple – To leave or to live?

We all know people who are either stuck in one rendering of the past or who have found ways to channel a particular powerful telling of the past as a way to transform and define their present.

One of my dear friends gets triggered every time he goes to a family gathering. Everything his parents or relatives do annoys him, frustrates him, and causes him to shut down. Once, in a moment of self reflection, he shared the following with me, “It’s not anything they do now. It’s all in the past. They changed and I changed. But when I’m with them, the past just comes back to life. I just can’t leave it behind.” In another conversation, that same friend noted, “It’s not that I don’t have good memories either. It’s just that those memories, for whatever reason, take less space.”

My friend is not unique.

More often than not we are selective about the way we remember the past; be it our relationship with our loved ones and our community, or our understanding of our personal history or our relationship with God. Sadly, more often than not, we allow our disappointments in others or our personal failings to take more space than the moments of personal connection and triumph.

Rosh HaShanah is a time to appeal to positive and constructive memory and to reject our negative and destructive renderings of the past.

At the end of this morning Haftorah we read, "*Haven yakir li Efrayim, im yeled shaashuim, ki midei daberi bu zachor ezkerenu od*" – God says, "Is Ephraim not My most precious child or a delightful youngster, that whenever I speak of him I remember him more and more?" The verse appears yet again in the middle of the *Zichronot* section of the Mussaf service.

God could have remembered Israel in many destructive and negative ways. God could have remembered our ethical and religious failings; our disloyalty to the path of the Torah. Instead, God, as it were, appeals to God's selective memory. God chooses to remember us in our youth, in our time of innocence, in a period of playfulness and delight.

But the verse communicates much more than that. In order to give life, to give relevance, to that memory, God must speak of it first. "*Ki midei daberi bu zachor ezkerenu od*" – God says, "The more I speak of him, I remember him more and more." In this very verse, God exemplifies for us the power of selective memory. Like God, each of us has the power to choose a particular rendering of the past so as to redefine the present tense.

The end of the verse is instructive yet again, "*Al ken hamu meay lu, rachem arachamenu, neum Hashem*" – "Therefore," says God, "My inner self yearns for him, I will surely be merciful with him, the words of the Lord." God's focus on a particular slice of the past, allows God to live mercifully in the present, and to reestablish a relationship with Israel, despite their severed past with God.

To leave or to live – that is the question.

This Rosh HaShanah ask yourself how can I remember myself differently so as to give greater meaning and significance to my life presently? What in my past might inspire greater love and compassion in my understanding of myself today?

This Rosh HaShanah ask yourself how can I remember my loved ones differently so as to give greater meaning and significance to my relationship with them presently? What in our shared past might inspire greater love and compassion in our connection to one another today?

This Rosh HaShanah ask yourself how can I remember my community of Beth Israel and my community of the People Israel differently so as to give greater meaning and significance to my sense of active belonging and participation? What in our shared past might inspire greater love and compassion in our communal connection today?

Finally, this Rosh HaShanah ask yourself how can I remember God differently so as to give greater meaning and significance to my relationship with God presently? What in my shared past with God might inspire greater love, compassion, and commitment in my connection to God today?

This Rosh HaShanah, may the Holy One write and seal us in God's Holy Book of selective memory.

May our power to selectively remember the past enable us to construct and build a better and holier present for ourselves and for all future generations.