

When Rabbi Borodin asked me to give a d'var this Shabbat, I quickly agreed. I then paused to consider what the parsha might be and realized it was Tazria/Metzora. Great! Skin diseases, mold in your house and “discharges”. I could have used Steve’s d’var from his tisch at our wedding as Tazria was the parsha that week but that didn’t seem fair. Then I remembered it was also Rosh Hodesh on Shabbat – that might help and I will actually tie the haftarah to my d’var. What I remembered next was that it was Yom HaShoah – Holocaust Remembrance Day – on Tuesday and that is when I decided on my topic – Memory or Zakhor. This is the main commandment of Yom HaShoah – that we never forget – always remember the 6 million. And next week we have Yom HaZikaron – again all about memory.

As Jews we speak of Memory more often than of history – WE went out of Egypt not some ragtag band of former slaves 3000 years ago. We remember experiences we have never actually had. We learn about memories and form and shape our own “Jewish memories” through education and ritual practice. History is interesting – I have a degree in History so I say that in all honesty – but memory is what gives things real meaning and impact. Memory is personal – it happened to us and not them, it happened now and not then. More on that later.

For thousands of years Jews, who were more educated and well read than the rest of the world and also more traveled and far flung, never really thought about history. For all the thousands of pages of Jewish writing prior to the Enlightenment almost none of it is about history. Jews weren’t concerned about history it seems – strange for a People who were so impacted by the exact history they found unimportant. In his book, Zakhor, Yosef Yerushalmi states “that although Judaism throughout the ages was absorbed with the meaning of history, historiography (the writing of history) itself played at best an ancillary role among the Jews, and often no role at all; and, concomitantly, that while memory of the past was always a central component of Jewish experience, the historian was not its primary custodian. (pg xxxiv) Memory for Jews does not equal history – its role and content is different than for other peoples. I love the way that Yerushalmi puts it – that it is not the historicity – the historical truth- of the past that is important to Jews but its eternal contemporaneity (pg 96) – Jews want their communal past to still have relevance to them – if it doesn’t feel like a personal memory than it isn’t relevant.

The Jewish focus on memory fades with the onset of Emancipation as the academic pursuit of history begins to interest Jews. However, the emphasis on the role of Memory in Judaism begins in the Torah itself. According to Yerushalmi, the verb zakhor appears in the Torah 169 times usually with God or Israel as the subject (pg5). Both God and Israel need to remember. God remembers God’s promises to Abraham and his descendents and responds to the cries of the Hebrew slaves. God commands us to remember and record Amalek’s name and actions so that we can then forget him – a completely different d’var there. I would like to focus though on the two versions of the Aseret HaDebrot – the Ten Commandments. The first set, given in Parshat Yitro, contain the commandment – **זכור את יום השבת לקדשו** Remember the Sabbath day and make it holy. Later, in Moshe’s final speech when the

commandments are repeated, the commandment relating to Shabbat is now לקדשו השבת יום את שמור – Guard the Sabbath day because the Lord your God has commanded you. That is a completely different thing than remember. Remember is passive, guard is active. When one looks at what has happened between these two tellings of the 10 commandments one can begin to understand why they might have changed. In the first set the reason for the observance of Shabbat is universal – because God created the world in 6 days and rested on the 7th day – and commandments 4 -10 are also not uniquely Jewish. These are a good set of commandments but don't reflect the challenges unique to God's relationship with B'nei Israel – which makes good sense as they have really just started to get to know each other. The second set, given 40 years later, is much more particularistic. We are not only to guard the Shabbat because God commanded it but we are to do it because God took us out of Egypt. While the main command is to guard, our reasons for guarding are based on our communal memory of being redeemed from Egypt by God. The verb zachor is still in the commandment but it has moved to a secondary position. Looking over the actions of B'nei Israel in the Wilderness it is easy to see why God might have revised the commandments to focus more on active memory rather than passive as God's trust in Israel's memory has been sorely tested. Mere weeks after receiving the commandments B'nei Israel breaks #2 by building the Golden Calf. They spend 40 years constantly forgetting who it was who saved their collective tuchis the last time they were slaves, hungry, thirsty or needed anything else. I propose that making not just passive Memory but active remembering part of our national identity was God's way of dealing with our communal failures. Actively keeping Shabbat has led to the creation of many beautiful rituals that give meaning and relevance to its continued observance. Keeping Shabbat is an active remembering of God resting on the 7th day as well as of God redeeming us from Egypt. As the saying goes more than Israel has kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept Israel. Active remembering – Sh'mor along with zachor – has kept the Jewish people together as a community – Shabbat observance, as well as kashrut, is an active guarding of tradition and they both have helped to sh'mor the Jewish community for millennia.

So we have actively kept Shabbat and it has kept us. What parts of our tradition have we not actively kept or perhaps even actively forgotten? What parts haven't we kept and what parts of our community haven't we kept because of this? We need to engage actively with our tradition and its stories in order for them to be relevant and meaningful in our lives. When we just passively remember something, it requires little personal investment – when we actively remember and engage with that memory and what it means we make personal investment and it becomes meaningful and relevant to us in a very different way. The parts of our history that we do actively remember are those that have a broader appeal. Almost all Jews regardless of their usual level of religious observance hold or attend a seder. They may follow none of the other laws of Pesah but they participate in the active memory of the Exodus from Egypt and it gives meaning to their Jewish personhood. For one or two nights a year, they are actively Jewish. They go out of Egypt and cross the Reed Sea on dry land. Again the question – what parts of our tradition do we not actively engage with and therefore have less of a connection with?

When I was in graduate school, I took a class on ancient Jewish mysticism – pre-Kabbalah – and I loved it! I was thrilled to see while reading Rashi's Daughters that some of this magic was still alive in our tradition in Rashi's time. It is now gone and rarely remembered passively let alone actively. Many Jews who have left Judaism looking for something more spiritual or mystical might have stayed had we had not allowed the Enlightenment to dull our memory of these facets of our tradition. Being actively engaged rather than just passively remembering the dusty corners of Judaism might make it far more appealing to many who find little meaning in it today.

While finding Ezekiel's vision and other hints of our mystical past in our liturgy can be difficult, reminders of I'ztiat mitzriam are abundant. Not just at Pesah but several times each Shabbat as well as each time we say the Shema and at other places in our liturgy are we reminded that God brought us out of Egypt. This brings us to the role of ritual in our memory formation. The three pilgrimage festivals were originally tied to the harvests. When we were no longer an agricultural people and especially when there was no Temple to take sacrifices and tithed produce to, these holidays gained new meanings and were used to commemorate and keep fresh in our memories important Biblical events. Pesah commemorates the Exodus, Shavuot the giving of Torah and Sukkot the time in the wilderness. We all live in Sukkot because that is what we – not they – did when we came out of Egypt. On Pesah we are commanded to behave as if we are slaves who have been given their freedom. We pour wine for each other, we recline when we eat. This isn't passive remembering – this is active. In the Torah Moses tells the generation born in the wilderness that they were at Mount Sinai and midrash teaches us that all Jews from all times were there. We are meant to have our own memories of this once in a lifetime – and not ours – event. What they experienced, we experienced as well. Communal sense memory demands that we feel that we have experienced these events personally. Forming these memories is the work of a Jewish lifetime. A friend who is discovering his Jewish roots as an adult shared with me a comment that Rabbi Borodin made to him at their first meeting – "It makes me sad that you have no Jewish memories." My friend told me that he wasn't sure what the Rabbi meant or why it made her sad. He didn't know what he was missing or why it was important. He shared that during the first seder it slowly dawned on him what Jewish memory was and that all of the people there had their own memories which were informing their actions at the seder. He also realized that he now had his own Jewish memory.

Yerushalmi also gives an example of a medieval piyyut – liturgical poem – for Tisha b'Av that captures the formation of memory through ritual

A fire kindles within me as I recall – when I left Egypt

But I raise laments as I remember – when I left Jerusalem

Moses sang a song that would never be forgotten – when I left Egypt

Jeremiah mourned and cried out in grief – when I left Jerusalem

The sea waves pounded but stood up like a wall – when I left Egypt

The waters overflowed and ran over my head – when I left Jerusalem

Moses led me and Aaron guided me – when I left Egypt

Nebuchadnezzar and the Emperor Hadrian – when I left Jerusalem

While it is in the past tense, it is I experiencing these things. Each person reciting claims these memories and experiences as their own and so the continued memory of these long past events is carried forward as if they happened in each of our lifetimes. I gave a d'var during Pesah last year about God wanting a religion of time and space and I think that this focus on Memory in Judaism comes from this drive – that only by each of us feeling a direct connection to our tradition and history will we remain connected to God and our faith – eternal contemporaneity in action. Yerushalmi writes “The collective memories of the Jewish people were a function of the shared faith, cohesiveness, and will of the group itself, transmitting and recreating its past through an entire complex of interlocking social and religious institutions that functioned organically to achieve this” (94) In other words, much of what we as Jews do is designed specifically to guard and carry forward our memories of events that happened 3000 years ago.

I began writing this d'var on Tuesday as I was watching the movie *Paperclips* – the story of a Middle School in Tennessee that has collected 24 million paper clips and created a beautiful memorial to the 6 million - with my Fifth Graders. In my class we study the Shoah all year and the students will soon begin their final project – a narrative piece where they create a character – a child – who would have lived in Germany in the 1930's. They will create memories of the early years leading up to the horrors of the 1940's for this character. Creating this zachor – this memory – will help them to shmor – guard – a better future for us all. The job of shom'rim for the memories of the Shoah will soon fall on those who did not witness or survive its horrors and having firmly developed memories will help these young people to pass on these stories and help keep them alive for future generations. But my students are Jewish and so keeping safe the memories of their People is a reasonable request. The children in *Paperclips* live in rural, white, Protestant Whitwell Tennessee and prior to starting their project in 1998 did not even know any Jews – the main reason the school undertook the project was to address this lack of exposure to other cultures. This makes watching their formation of memories of the Holocaust even more moving. To watch the school principal be reduced to tears upon entering a cattle car from Germany because she can feel the people who were transported in it is amazing – even more so the Middle School students who say they can “feel the souls” in each paperclip. This is all because of the Jews who shared their memories as they sent in all of those paperclips. These young people have been

changed forever by this experience of Jewish memory and they will work to make the world a better place. My favorite quote was “you better be knowing someone before you starting thinking and talking.” Not the best English but a sentiment that sums up tolerance quite well. Their memorial to the 6 million will help to educate others and keep alive the memories and lessons of the Shoah. Actively remembering the horrors of the Shoah – retelling the stories and memorializing those who were lost - will help us to guard their memory and guard against future genocides. Passive memory will not serve in this situation. Remembering that leads to action is what is needed. Perhaps we should have Sh'mor as the theme of Yom HaShoah instead of Zachor?

In the haftarah for Shabbat Rosh Hodesh we have a vision of Jerusalem reborn and the rebuilding of the Temple there in Messianic times (you didn't think I remembered I was supposed to tie this together did you?). It is this future of a world of peace and a Jerusalem of peace that was the end of history for the Rabbis and has been a motivator for Jews throughout history. It is our memory of God's promises to us that have sustained Jews through horrific times. It will be our guarding of the memories of those horrific times that will help us to do our part in bringing to fruition God's promises of universal peace. Good Shabbos.