

Cultivating Memory On This Yom Hazikaron

I imagine that most of us remember exactly where we were on *that* morning. Twenty-five years ago, yesterday, right around Rosh Hashanah, on that morning with a perfectly clear blue sky, when our country would forever be changed. September 11, 2001. We remember the images on T.V. We remember the first collapse- at 9:59, the first Tower. And then the second one, at 10:28. Nearly three thousand people lost their lives, entire worlds of families, friends, communities, forever changed. There are so many stories- not one of them can accurately capture that pain, sadness, and fear so many of us felt on that day, a quarter of a century ago. But we remember the images, the impossible clouds of ash and dust taking over downtown Manhattan, the horror of people jumping from the buildings. We remember listening to the phone calls that loved ones made from the towers as they tried to get out, or said goodbye. We remember the bravery of the FDNY, Police, and first responders who ran toward the wreckage while everyone else ran away. We remember much of it, I imagine, as if it was yesterday.

Jane-Rachel and I, as newlyweds, were in our car driving from Baltimore to DC to pick up visas from the Israeli Embassy in preparation for a planned year of living and studying in Israel. We never made it. We were turned back. The Israeli waving us down told us to turn around. *We were under attack*, he said.

We drove back to my mother-in-law's house and spent the next few days glued to the TV, watching the unimaginable images like everyone else, until Shabbat arrived and we were, blessedly, forced to take a break. A few days later, we returned to New York, moving forward with our graduate studies, living under a shadow of fear and navigating this new reality alongside all city residents.

As we gather this morning, twenty-five years later, we find ourselves marking the anniversary of this horrific moment in our country's history alongside our welcoming of the new year. The intersection of these days may seem like a simple coincidence of the calendar, but the alignment is also connected in meaningful ways beyond the happenstance of the date.

You see, another name for Rosh Hashanah is *Yom Hazikaron*, the Day of Remembrance. In addition to celebrating creation and spending time on self-reflection, Rosh Hashanah is also a memorial day of sorts. It is a day when we remember those who came before us, those who influenced us, those who celebrated with us. We remember those with whom we have lost touch, those relationships that have become strained for reasons that we may (or may not) remember. In the *zikhronot* section of the musaf service that we will recite shortly, we ask God to *remember us*. And I'm sure many people cannot help but remember holiday celebrations from years past. Maybe you're even

specifically remembering Rosh Hashana 2001, which was certainly a surreal time for celebration, as the holiday began on September 17th, just six days after the attacks, when Americans were still in a state of initial shock.

It should not be surprising that we start off the Jewish New Year through a lens of memory. Memory, as a value, figures prominently in the Jewish tradition. The root word “Zakhar” (memory) shows up in the Tanakh 169 times. *Remember*, you were freed from Egypt; *remember* what God did for you; *remember* your ancestors; *remember* your time in the desert; “remember Amalek.” Even when God appears throughout the Torah, the story is frequently framed through remembering the past: “I am the God of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rebekah, Isaac, Leah and Rachel; the one who ‘brought you forth from Egypt,’” God explains, time and time again. Remember who I am. Remember who you are.

The importance of memory is so critical that we are *explicitly* warned in the book of Devarim (Deuteronomy) about the dangers of forgetting our story.

When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the ETERNAL your God—who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage...” (Deuteronomy, 8:10-17)

The message? Remembering is critical. Nurturing, developing, and cultivating memories as a people is essential. I am not speaking of history here, per se. History is about recorded facts. History can be rich and complex. History, too, can be examined objectively and critically. Memory, however, is something somewhat different.

In the past twenty-five years, for example, there have been great efforts to record and the specifics of what happened on Sept. 11th 2001 and to memorialize those whose lives were cut short. But the question I want us to consider this Rosh Hashana, is less about the specifics of what happened, and more about how the events of that day changed us. How have we, as a country, moved forward in our lives with this tragic day weighing on our memories? How have our memories of that day seeped into our consciousness? Or, have we moved on too quickly?

As Jews, we are asked to be incredibly intentional about how memory is preserved, cultivated, and passed on. Historian Yosef Hayim Yerhushalmi once wrote: "Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people."¹ Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks expands on this idea beautifully. He wrote:

¹ Zakhor, Jewish History and Jewish Memory, p. 9

There is a profound difference between history and memory. History is *his* story – an event that happened sometime else to someone else. Memory is *my* story – something that happened to me and is part of who I am....I can study the history of other peoples, cultures, and civilizations. They deepen my knowledge and broaden my horizons. But they do not make a claim on me. ...Without memory there can be no identity. As with individuals, so with a nation: ***it has a continuing identity to the extent that it can remember where it came from and who its ancestors were.***²

As Jacob Neusner eloquently wrote: “Civilisation hangs suspended, from generation to generation, by the gossamer strand of memory. **If only one cohort of mothers and fathers fails to convey to its children** what it has learnt from its parents, then the great chain of learning and wisdom snaps.... More than any other faith, Judaism made this a matter of religious obligation.”³

So, on this *Yom Hazkaron*, on this day when we, as Jews, focus on memory; on this day when we, as Americans, remember the events of twenty-five years ago, I would like to invite us to take a moment to consider exactly how memory fits into our lives today. What memories impact our everyday actions? What memories have we prioritized passing down to our children, our grandchildren? What American memories hold universal significance to everyone in our country, or is this even possible? What memories have we held onto as Jews, and, perhaps most importantly, why are we holding onto these memories? What's the purpose of this remembering?

Memories, in the Jewish tradition, are seen as something to build upon as we journey into the future. Memory is meant to inform us, to make a claim on us

² The Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, p. 38

³ Ibid, p. 41

today. To remember, as a Jew, is to engage in something active, not passive. We say this twice a day in the third paragraph of the Sh'ma: we are to remember in order to “do all of the mitzvot (למען תזכרו ועשיתם את כל מצוות ד).” Our *Etz Hayim Humash* points out that remembering, “embraces concern and involvement, and **always leads to action**.”⁴ When we put the Torah away, we say ימינו כקדם חדש, renew our days “as of old.” Our renewal today is always tied to the memory of the past. Perhaps Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief Ashkenazi rabbi of British Mandated Palestine, explained it best when he taught: חדש והחדש יתקדש-that which is old shall become new, and that which is new, shall become holy.

As Jews, we must not only remember, we must transform memory into sacred action. As Jews under threat from all sides in America and the world today, with anti-Semitism on the rise and so much ignorant and irrational hatred being directed our way, perhaps some feel that they would like to leave the “past in the past.” Perhaps all of those Jewish holidays, celebrations, rituals, customs, and teachings do not seem all that important to preserve. Or, perhaps the opposite is true. As I said last year, I would suggest that one response during these difficult times is to **lean into** your Judaism. To lean into our collective memories in order to figure out how we are going to actively create new ones.

⁴ Exodus 2:24

Just last week I read a new book by Dara Horn, with the intentionally jarring and edgy title: *The Final Solution to the Jewish Question- A Love Story for the Living*. It is an incredibly enlightening and important book to read as a Jew, as it helps explain what led to what we have been going through over the past few years and what we might be able to do about it. (I would encourage all of you to put this at the top of your reading list.) Horn recognizes that, in these difficult times, many Jews might seek to “go back into hiding,” but she challenges us to, instead, choose Jewish literacy and critical thinking, to engage with our Jewish family across the world with love, and (most relevant to my remarks this morning), to “make memory”.⁵ She uses the Jewish holidays to explain how we as a people can and must do this as a critical key to our survival as a people. She writes:

Jewish holidays are less commemorations than reenactments; eating matzah and bitter herbs on Passover to reenact the people's enslavement, building outdoor huts on Sukkot to reenact their journey to the land of Israel, fasting and bowing to the floor on Yom Kippur as their ancestors once did in a House long destroyed. These and dozens of repeated moments like them are physical reminders of the love story, like a smell that reminds you of the place where you first met. They are remembered in the body as one ages, layering the body's memory into the laws and stories until the past trembles with the present.

“...all Jews today are Jews by choice, **choosing** to be part of this story. (But) They are only able to do so because of the hard countercultural choices that were made by the generations before them and that continue to be made today. Those choices are as difficult now as they ever were. Despair and disappearance are the default. Choosing life is an act of love. The love story continues.”⁶

⁵ Horn, p. 284

⁶ Horn, p. 285

Indeed. But this “love story” only continues if we reach back in our memories and choose to be countercultural, choose to be Jewish, choose not just to “drop the whole thing,” even when it is hard. Scholar Yossi Klein Halevi recently said in a podcast that there is a crisis of memory for American Jews.⁷ He reminded us that remembering as a Jew means going back 4000 years, and remembering (as we say during the Passover seder) that we must experience the story of our people again today. This can only happen when we take responsibility for preserving the collective memory of our people and allow it to make a claim on us today.

What choices are we making when it comes to preserving Jewish memory? Why is it, for example, that Hanukkah and Passover are the most widely celebrated holidays for American Jews? What is it about these holidays that has continued to engage us for all of these years? Maybe it relates to the themes of freedom found in both? Or maybe it has to do with the warm memories associated with both and our connections to generations past?

And what about those less celebrated holidays, Shavuot (where we remember the receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai), or Tisha b'av (where we remember the destruction of the Temples), or even Purim, where we recall how tenuous our

⁷ Why Are Young Jews Turning Against Israel, Yossi Klein Halevi and Sara Labaton <https://arkmedia.org/for-heavens-sake/>

position can be as Jews living in a Diaspora society? I often wonder why so many American Jews choose to push some of these holidays to the side and, in doing so, push aside the powerful impact that these memories can and will have on our lives.

What about Shabbat? Do you have memories of celebrating Shabbat with parents and grandparents- eating Shabbat dinners, lighting candles, or going to synagogue? Do you have memories of creating these celebrations with children, and will we all be able to continue the tradition of Shabbat with our grandchildren, creating new memories for them to hold onto?

What about *Yom Ha'atzmaut*- Israel's Independence Day? Some in this room have very clear memories of the beginnings of the State, of a time when Israel was not the regional power it is today. Many of us have very deep memories of the dangers that come along with a *weakened* Israel. Some of us have memories that include loved ones who have been killed in Israel, in wars or in acts of terror. Others have very different “memories” of Israel, especially those here who may have little to no connection to the actual people, the place, the land. But we all need to ask, “How do our memories of the role Israel has played in our lives impact us today?,” especially since October 7th.

And then the next step: considering how these Jewish memories influence our lives and our choices. Much of this likely depends on the experiences we have, or don't have; the ones intentionally cultivated in us by those who came before, and the ones that were, intentionally or not, left aside. The question for us this morning is: what memories are we seeking to hold onto, and what memories are we still trying to create? And, if we have chosen to let go of some memories, to not pass them forward to the next generation, why have we made that choice? Is it too late, on Rosh Hashanah, to do *teshuvah*, to turn and choose to make a different choice moving forward? Do we even want to?

Switching from our lives as "*Jewish Americans*" to our lives as "*American Jews*." In the twenty-five years since September 11, 2001, what have we, as individuals and Americans, been doing to honor the sacrifices of those who lost their lives on that day? How have we actively remembered, or have we completely forgotten? Do you remember the unity we felt, even briefly, when we realized we were being attacked as a collective? Osama Bin Laden and his fellow terrorists did not care if their victims were Democrats or Republicans, Independents, Libertarians, or members of the Green Party. They attacked our collective way of life, the values and the freedoms essential to us as Americans. Twenty-five years later- do we remember **any of that**? Do we behave in a way that genuinely reflects respect for the memory of those nearly 3000 individuals whose lives were cut short? Do we live our lives in a way that holds onto that

deep understanding that we are all united as a part of this big, messy collective that we call America? Or are we too busy tearing each other apart, from within, by going down the rabbit holes of algorithmic manipulation and confirmation bias?

Some of you probably remember the huge blackout that happened 11 months after 9-11. Jane-Rachel and I had tickets to a concert in Central Park and were on the bus heading toward the bandshell when the power started going out. At first, we thought it was just our street, or just the few blocks around us. But as the bus traveled downtown, everyone quickly realized this was something much bigger. And, as people who had witnessed the worst attacks ever on American soil less than one year before, everyone understandably got a little panicky. Was this another attack? Was this just happening in NY, along the whole East Coast, or across the whole country? And who or what was causing it?

Once we felt reasonably confident it was not a terrorist attack, we continued on to the concert but left the park early to make it out before it was completely dark. As we rode back uptown towards our building, we felt this incredible connection with our neighbors. Everyone helped one another on and off the bus; cars along Broadway shone their headlights into stores and restaurants, illuminating the spaces so people could gather to drink and eat before the food went bad. And even as we walked through the very dark, and potentially

dangerous streets near our apartment, we felt safer than usual because we knew everyone around us was in the same boat.

I wonder what would happen today? I wonder how we would all behave in 2026, well removed from the 9-11 attacks, if this kind of strange and unsettling event would unite us like it did in 2002, or if we would consider it “just a blackout.” On that day 24 years ago, people were passing their cell phones around the bus to allow those who did not have phones (they were not as ubiquitous at that time) to call home. Would this happen today, or would we each just keep our heads down, scrolling on our own phones, retreating into our own little worlds?

What choices should we be making today, as Americans, based on our memories of terrible moments in our collective experience? How do we live our lives in a way that respects and responds to our memories of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, by the COVID pandemic, by the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting, and so on?

The beauty of Rosh Hashana is the opportunity to remember, and to allow our memories to catalyze our teshuvah. To allow memories from the past to remind us how to redirect our lives, our priorities, our choices. Rosh Hashanah as *Yom Hazikaron* asks us to consider what we are going to do *hayom*, (as the *tefilah* at

the end of services says), today, based on what happened yesterday. We remember 9-11-**so what now?** We remember our own personal and collective Jewish pasts - **so what now?** We remember relationships that we once had, those that were wonderful and deep connections to people with whom we have since lost touch. Will this be the year that we reconnect with some of them?

Today, as we mark the birthday of the world, the opening of a new year, is the time to take a step back to, as Americans, as Jews, individually and collectively, to consider how these memories *can and should* inform our choices and our actions. It is a time to ask how we might redirect our lives in order to honor these memories.

We cannot pass on *all* of the particulars of our own memories to the next generation, but we *can* tell our children, grandchildren, friends, and family members about our most important memories and the impact they continue to have on our lives today. And we *can* celebrate the new year together, beginning the cycle again, creating *new memories* that will sustain the next generation of Jews.

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism, once taught that “forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret to redemption.” In these uncertain and disorienting days as Americans and as Jews, let us look to our past to inform our present and allow our memories to guide our future. On this Yom Hazikaron, let us be mindful that teshuvah is about turning our choices around, making different, intentional choices based on what and how we remember. May we turn to our past to inform our present, moving forward in our lives in ways that reflect our memories and our values, as Jews and as Americans.

And may the lives of all who died on September 11, 2001, be for a blessing. I now ask you all to rise, **to remember them**, as we recite the mourner's Kaddish together.