



Temple Beth David

The Power to Recreate Our Past, Present, and Future

YK morning 2011
Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers
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A few old couples used to get together to talk about life and to have a good time. One day one of the men, Harry, started talking about this fantastic restaurant he went to the other night with his wife. “Really?”, one of the men said, what’s it called? After thinking for a few seconds Harry said, “What are those good smelling flowers called again?” “Do you mean a rose?, the first man questioned. “Yes that’s it,” he exclaimed. Looking over at his wife he said, “Rose what’s that restaurant we went to the other night?”¹

Oh, memory, who can remember? It appears to be more and more elusive as we get older. We are all forgetful. What was it we ate for dinner two days ago? What did I do last weekend? What was her name? Even though we forget seemingly trivial things like the name of a restaurant, we don’t forget pivotal moments of our lives. We remember our weddings as well as our divorces. We remember the birth of our children as we do the death of our parents. We remember the great successes as well as our failures. Memory is so important to us as human beings. Our memories define us, inform us who we are, and guide us in future decision making. No coincidence that we just celebrated Rosh Hashanah, ten days ago. Rosh Hashanah is also called Yom Hazikaron, the day of remembering. Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of a time where we try to remember things we have done, ways we could have done better, in hopes of reminding God that we are more deserving than we seem. On Rosh Hashanah, God remembers our deeds and our past, inscribes us in the book of life and then by Yom Kippur, today, our fate is sealed. Memory and remembering our past are essential parts of our High Holy Day season for us, and can impact the present and future year ahead.

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At this time of remembrance, let's think about the things we can easily recall. A while back my husband and I were discussing the passage of time. I said, "Wow, our kids are getting older, time is going by fast." He responded, "No, times goes by slowly. Think of this day and all that has occurred." As I pondered his response, I realized that a lot does happen in one day, I'm just not paying that much attention to it. When I really take the time to reflect on all the people I encounter in one day, the things I have done, the experiences I have had and then multiply it by 7 days a week and then by 4 weeks in a month, it's amazing what has transpired in 30 days. There are so many things that have occurred, I can't recall them all and so it feels like a blur. Just think of it right now. We are here in the sanctuary and time is going to pass rather slowly. I'm not implying that any of you are bored or tired. No of course not. But whether we remember sitting here in the sanctuary 3 years from now is dependent on what is going to follow. If this is a normative service, I conclude the sermon and service without any fanfare, we will likely not remember this moment. For you, this will be another Yom Kippur service. However if a lion bursts through the doors chased by a circus clown, I think this service will be memorable. More likely if an earthquake suddenly shakes the building, panicking us, it's likely to stick in our memory. Why does it take something significant to occur for us to remember?

David J. Linden in his book Accidental Mind explains this phenomenon. He writes that our brains only write down certain experiences. He says, "We need a signal to say, "This is an important memory. Write this down and underline it." That signal is emotion." He continues, "When you have feelings of fear or joy or love or anger or sadness, these mark your experiences as being particular meaningful. These are the memories you most need to store and keep safe. These are the ones that are most likely to be relevant in future situations. These are the building blocks that form logic, reasoning, social cognition, and decision making."² So in essence, when we are angry, sad, happy, or excited, we are more likely to remember these moments because they can help us create better times in the future or prevent negative experiences from happening again. This is why we are going to remember that cancer diagnosis or more nicely our first kiss.

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Our pleasant memories and experiences are indeed pleasant. What to do though with the negative memories? Yes it's good to hold on to the memory that jumping into the ocean in January is very, very cold or that a certain person is dishonest in business dealings. Those are recollections that safeguard us. However, there are plenty of negative memories that no longer serve to protect us but actually end up immobilizing us in the present. There are cases of Post Traumatic Stress or past abuse where people are no longer in a dangerous or threatening situation but they act as though they are. There are even less extreme examples such as our memory of something hurtful a person said, a terrible thing a parent did, or the rejection of a loved one. However, if we focus too much on these things, our memories can paralyze us with anger, hatred, and bitterness. We may cease to go to places we liked, quit organizations we cared for, and stop doing things that brought us joy. By dwelling on disappointments, hurts, and pain, we may curtail our ability to live fully in the present and future.

What if we could change the past? I'm not talking science fiction where a person gets into a time machine and is saved from a car accident but rather what if the way we remember an event could be changed? Often, we acknowledge that the future may indeed be unwritten but we believe that we can't change the past; what happened, happened, what was, was and we just have to either try to forget about it, sweep in under the carpet of our subconscious, or get over it. However, recently I've come to understand that even though our future is unwritten, our past may be as well. At least our recollection of it.

I was listening to a podcast on Radiolab that covered a NY NPR segment called "Memory and Forgetting" on June 7, 2007. In it they described that scientists do not believe our memory is like opening up a cabinet and checking the details of a file. It is also not like our computer where we search for a topic or title and up pops the writing exactly from the day we wrote it. According to scientists, our memory does not work like this. To prove it, there have been studies on a drug administered to someone who has had a traumatic experience that can erase or substantially ease the memory of it. What they found is that the drug not only works at the time

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of the occurrence but also whenever a person is recalling a painful memory. This has led researchers to conclude that every time we remember something, we are recreating it in our mind. Even more so, Dr Elizabeth Loftus, ran some famous experiments in the 1970's where she proved that through mere suggestion, people could remember experiences that never happened to them. She stated in an interview in 2007 that "Memory is malleable and we might as well face the truth."³ What this means is that our memories are not just forming at the moment of the event but each and every time we recall them.

This process of recollection that recreates a memory also changes it. So it would be like opening a file on our computer where we described an experience however one year later we reread it and discover details that were not in the original. Professor Yadin Dudai from Israel stated on the program, "If you have a memory, the more you use it, the more you are likely to change it but if you never use the memory, it's secure. The safest memory is in the brains of those who can't remember."³ So those of us who like to recount over and over how we met our partner. Each time we recall it, we change it. That first kiss may have been short in actuality but now as we remember it, hmmm, it goes on and on and on.

Why am I sharing this with you today on Yom Kippur is because we have greater power than even I realized to shape who we are and who we want to be. What I am saying is that we don't have to be prisoners of our past. We can remember it in different ways. Let's take a walk down memory lane, knowing that our memory of an event is only as old as the last time we recalled it. Let's go back to that time when we were angry at our parent, significant other, friend, or child. How can we look that situation differently? I mean can we ascribe a more benign motivation to them? Is it possible that they didn't mean the things we remember them saying or doing? Is it possible that a different conclusion could be drawn from the event? Try to imagine them as trying to do what they thought to be best, that they acted with good intent. Let's look at ourselves, is there anything good that we can take away from our failure and

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disappointment? If our past is only as old as the present, maybe with a slightly different perspective, our past may seem better than it did yesterday.

In the Bible, there is one person who does this. Joseph, favored son of Jacob and Rachel had some significant traumatic experiences in his youth. His brothers were so jealous of him that one day they threw him into a dark pit, stole his colored tunic, and sold him as a slave to Midianite/Ishmaelite traders. I can't even imagine what it would be like to be uprooted from one's home and made into a slave. We don't know what Joseph felt during this time but it had to be terrifying. Sometime later, Joseph ends up in Egypt as a worker in Potiphar's house. It's going okay initially until Joseph is falsely accused by Potiphar's wife. Joseph ends up going from bad to worse, where he finds himself in jail for years. However, in time, Joseph through hard work and a vision for the future, rises up to become Pharaoh's right hand man.

Well, fast forward some years later. Joseph is successful, he has money, resources, and power. His brothers, the same ones who sold him out, stand before him. If there was anyone who could be or should be bitter about his past, if there was anyone who should be angry towards his siblings, it is Joseph. He had the means and the motive, to severely punish his brothers. Joseph says to them instead, "Have no fear!..Although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result- the survival of many people...fear not I will sustain you and your children."⁴ Wow! This is an amazing moment of forgiveness! How could Joseph be so kind to people who enslaved him and lied to his father about his death? In order to do this, Joseph had to take the painful past memories and put into a greater perspective of his life. Joseph successfully transformed the hardships of his past into a blessing and in doing so lessened his bitterness and anger towards his brothers. It is because of Joseph's ability to reimagine his past, he was able to create a future for his family in the face of severe famine in Israel.

I'm not suggesting this is easy. When we have bad memories of being hurt and angry, it's there for a reason. But we have to ask ourselves is it really helping us live fully today, here and now.

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In order to transform them, I think it's helpful to know that they may not be accurate transcripts of what literally happened, only our most recent understanding of them. Perhaps, we may have more flexibility than we realized. What I am saying is that we are holding the pen over our own book of life. We have the ability to write blessings even from bad times. Can we willfully look at painful moments and pen in some understanding, perhaps acknowledge that we may have perceived things wrongly, that maybe others are not quite as evil as we initially thought? Maybe with a little more compassion, understanding, and tolerance we can come to peace with our past experiences. We can look for the good in others that have harmed us. In doing so, we can recreate memories that can help us live fully in the present and meaningfully in the future. We may not remember my Yom Kippur sermon from last year or even what we ate two days ago, but we can choose to look at the good, we can choose create blessings out of hardship, we can choose to make the most of lives.

Notes

¹ <http://www.greatcleanjokes.com/427/memory-problems/>

² David J. Linden in his book *Accidental Mind*, y pg. 108

³ <http://www.radiolab.org/2007/jun/07/>

<http://www.radiolab.org/people/dr-elizabeth-loftus/>

She's a psychologist in the department of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California at Irvine, and her research shows that you can implant memories—wholly false memories—pretty easily into the brains of humans. Her work challenges the reliability of eye-witness testimony, and is so controversial that she once had to call the bomb squad.

⁴ Gen. 50:19-21