

## **Telling our own stories**

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I read a book last spring called “Wild” by Cheryl Strayed. It’s about a woman in her twenties who decided that she would hike a thousand miles of the Pacific Crest Trail by herself. She quit her job, filled her back pack with everything she would need, and began a journey that was both physically and psychologically strenuous. Her back pack was so heavy that she nicknamed it, ‘Monster’. At one point, duck tape was holding her sandals together. She came close to dying from thirst when she ran out of water. Throughout her weeks and months, she covered hills and valleys as she sorted through her identity, the woman she was, and the one she wanted to be. As she faced the hardships of the wild, she remembered the experiences of her childhood as she walked on to her future.

The book was certainly entertaining. I marveled at the courage of the author but even more so her ability to put pen to paper and write about her experiences. Even though I have no desire to carry a heavy pack over any kind of distance, I wonder how I would unpack my 44 years of life. If I were to write an autobiography, what would I put down? What have I taken with me as I have traveled from Buffalo, N.Y. to Binghamton University to Jerusalem, Israel, New York City, Chicago, and Orange County, California? What are the relationships I have gained? What ones have I lost? What are the high points of my life? What were the low ones? How about you? If you were to put together a book on your life what would you write? What experiences have you had that are memorable?

Writing and books are great imagery for the High Holy Days. You are familiar with the Talmudic teaching of Rabbi Kruspedai who said on Rosh Hashanah, God opens three books. One is the book of life and those who are completely righteous are immediately inscribed in it. The other is the book of death and the wholly wicked are immediately written in it. Then there is the book for the ‘in between’, those who are neither entirely good nor entirely bad. This is supposed to be all of us. We are held in limbo until Yom Kippur. We don’t know what our fate will be and so we try harder to be better people in hopes of a good seal on Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement. This notion of a seal suggests an end, finality, the big one, however for most of us our lives do continue on. With another year stretched before us, there is nevertheless a sense of suspense. Will this be a good year? What will happen with our job, our family, and our friends? We don’t know definitively what will happen in the future but we do know where we have been.

Let's take a look at our past. If we were to sift through our own book of life what would we find? Regardless of what age we are at, we have done and experienced so much. How do we recall, recollect, and convey all the things that have happened to us? We can rummage through the memories of our childhood and upbringing. We can smile or cringe at our teenage years. It's interesting to see how we made the transition from youth to adult and then to maturity. Let's take a moment to remember our past.

Memory turns out to be a peculiar thing. We are not as good at it as we think. David Linden, Professor of Neuroscience at Johns Hopkins University school of Medicine, in his book The Accidental Mind, speaks about the difficulties concerning memory. For one, we are very prone to misattribution. This means that we may remember an event or idea but misattribute who was there or who said what. How often have we shared what occurred only to be corrected by our spouse or friend? "No Henry, Sarah was with us that night not Johnny. Oh, yeah." Our memories are not accurate recording devices. In addition, our minds tend to fill in the gaps. If we don't remember all the details, our fantastic brain will fabricate them. And our memories can be corrupted even by a mere suggestion. This has been demonstrated in mistakes people can make even in a routine police lineup.<sup>1</sup>

How do we remember anything at all given all the experiences we have in one week not to mention an entire year? I think I would strain myself to remember what I did last Saturday. When we remember the prominent events of our lives, we will likely be able to identify a heightened sense of emotion. If you go back into your childhood, you are more likely to remember events if you experienced immense joy or fear at the same time.

I remember, for example, one Thanksgiving at my Aunt Sandy's house as a young child. She served an elaborate meal and then to my child's delight, she brought out individual cakes! Wow! An entire cake just for me. It has more than one layer. It was colorfully frosted. It was a dream come true. I was already full but I wasn't going to pass up on this opportunity. I stuffed myself so much that later on, I threw up all over her floor. I remember this because of the joy and surprise and also because of the pain. When our experiences are combined with high emotion, they are inscribed in our memories.<sup>2</sup>

Our remembrances can be corrupted and may be inaccurate however they still shape us and inform our decisions today. Even though we may mistake who was at a graduation, the feelings we had can still bring us laughter in the present. How and what we remember can be more important than what actually transpired. Let's take, for example, our Torah. This is our most sacred work. It contains the stories of the creation of humanity, God's summons of Abraham, and our people facing famine in Israel. The Torah records our descent into Egypt, our long enslavement there, and then our freedom. We then have the long 40 years traversing the desert until our people make it to the Promised Land of Israel.

Now it's fun in academic settings to pick apart what really happened thousands of years ago. Is it possible that Abraham had an altercation with the Philistines at 1800 BCE when we know the Philistines were part of the Sea Peoples who didn't come to Israel until the beginning of the Iron Age in 1200 BCE? What about our time in Egypt? There are no records of our people serving as slaves building garrison cities for Pharaoh. Also there is no archaeological evidence for any massive migration of people through the Sinai desert. Did these things really happen?

I think the answer is much more complicated. Yes, there are historical truths in the Torah but not necessarily every detail or date is accurate. The amazing thing though is that it really doesn't matter. Our people's memory of toiling in Egypt and crying out to God is as true to me as any truth could be. I love archaeology and Biblical criticism however around the Passover Seder, I feel the suffering of our ancient Israelites in Egypt, I celebrate our freedom, and I internalize the lessons of our story. It is because of our recorded memories as slaves to Pharaoh that we must look out for those who are marginalized and vulnerable in our society today. The Exodus out of Egypt shapes my identity, affects my actions, and is a part of who I am.

Let me give you another example. What we believe to be true is more important than what truly is. I remember in elementary school around 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade always being the last kid chosen to be on the gym teams. It didn't matter if it was kickball, softball, or soccer. I was seen as one who wasn't good at sports, I was undesirable, and I believed it. Now interestingly, I remember going to summer camp and there I discovered that I was very good. I was the top athlete. On the town softball team, I was one of the better players. Somehow at school, I believed what others did that I wasn't any good. It wasn't until 5<sup>th</sup> grade that I was finally able to show my ability. I gained enough confidence at summer camp that I was able to try, really try. Even my gym teacher told me how surprised she was to learn that I could run fast. My perception of myself shaped my action. When I believed I wasn't good, I didn't try hard, and I fumbled. On the other hand, when I knew I was strong and fast, I proved it.

So we have a power. This is a power to shape who we are by making choices in how we think about ourselves. Our Torah reading tomorrow tells us that we can make a choice between life and death. I would like to suggest that we can choose how we look at our past knowing that our memories are not cast in stone. We can rewrite the lesson and the conclusion.

Let's start with emotional experiences that have been inscribed in our memories. What are the high and low points of your life? What good things have happened to us? Is it that ball hit into the outfield, first kiss, success at work, artistic creation, birth of your child, or sense of accomplishment? It's always fun to think about the fun and joyous times of our lives. They always bring a smile. But how about the painful times, the moments of failure, illness, or loss? Often we try to brush these memories aside but by looking at them with a different perspective,

we can transform them. What did we learn from this experience? How did this shape our identity today? Even with our feelings of shame or sadness, is there some glint of meaning, some speck of redemption that can help us transcend them? Even our most painful memories can be seen as helping us develop into the caring and loving adults we are today. If you were to write our own book, how would you like to remember the experiences of your past?

Memory is critical to us as Jews. In Deuteronomy, chapter 8:2, Moses says, “Remember, *zacharta*, the long way that the Eternal your God has made you travel in the wilderness.” Moses recounts to the new generation of Israelites what befell their parents and grandparents. He describes the hardships of the desert, the eating of manna from heaven, the sin of the golden calf, and the lapse in judgment of the scouts. Moses is not just recounting the past in order to relive it. He is sharing the Israelites’ experience for a purpose. He is sharing it so our people can forge a better life in the future, in the Promised Land. Moses says, “God is bringing you into a good land with streams, fountains, wheat, barley, vines, figs, pomegranates, olive trees, and honey.”

Moses is attempting to frame the past so this new generation of Israelites can learn from it. He doesn’t want them to make the same mistakes of idolatry. He wants to remind them to be optimistic about coming into Israel. Moses is trying to bring them into a better place and transition them from the familiarity of the desert to a new life with new challenges. How do we take our past and use it to build a future for ourselves and our families? We don’t stop living no matter if we are 20, 50, or 90 years old. True enough we may have limitations. We may not have the resources to live the way we wish. Our bodies may not allow us the options we once had. But we are still here. Our lives haven’t been sealed in the book of death, not yet. We are alive. So how are we going to live tomorrow? What do we want for ourselves next week, next month, or next year? And more importantly how are we going to get there?

I think the Promised Land for us is not a destination but it’s a really an attitude we have on our life journey. We don’t get to the end until it’s the end. Until that destined time, how do we live fully in every way? Bachya ibn Pakuda, a Spanish rabbi of the 11<sup>th</sup> century taught, “Days are scrolls: write on them only what you want remembered.”<sup>3</sup> Bachya is teaching that we have the power to write our own story. Even if our memories are not 100% accurate, how we remember not only shapes our past but how we live today. “Days are scrolls: write on them only what you want remembered.” What experiences do wish to remember? How have they helped us to be the people we are today? And more importantly, how we can we live each day and make it memorable?

We don't have to hike the Pacific Crest trail with a heavy backpack. We don't even have to write our autobiographies. But I think tonight at the beginning of our Day of Atonement, we can take time to look at where we have come from and who we are. Taking with us our memories as individuals and a people, we can shape the kind of future we want. Our past is a part of us, the good and the bad. And here we are now with the power to write ourselves into the book of life through our acts, attitude, and good works. May we all be able to appreciate the experiences of our past, living fully in the present, and enjoy a future year of blessing.

Notes:

- 1 The Accidental Mind by David J. Linden. Pg. 125
- 2 The Accidental Mind by David J. Linden Chapter Five: Learning, Memory, and Human Individuality
- 3 Machzor pg. 233