

**Memory and remembering**  
 Kol Nidrei 2024  
 Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

A man awakes to find himself lying by a lonely country road with no memory of who he is and how he got there. Then a genie appears. "What is your third wish, master?" the Genie asks. Confused, the man feebly asks, "My wish? Who are you, and why can't I remember anything?" "I am your genie," the Genie replies. "You are here because your second wish was to forget who you were and be taken far away from everything you once knew. Now, my master, I'm in haste, so tell me, what is your final wish?"

"My final wish," thoughtfully answers the man, "Is to remember everything about who I am."

The Genie starts laughing.

"What's so funny?" asks the man.

The Genie replies, "That was your first wish."<sup>1</sup>

Oh, what would it take for us not to want to remember who we are, what we have done, or the events of our lives? It would have to be something terrible, traumatic, or highly regrettable, I would think. I hope none of us are in such a state. Most of us, I believe, like remembering and feel good about, at least, most things in our lives. True enough, we all acknowledge that knowing what we now know, we would change some decisions and actions. To be sure, if we were aware of certain events or factors, perhaps we would've made different choices. And yet we realize that the mistakes we have made in our lives, while unpleasant, have led to some great life lessons. And so we try to teach others by what we have gotten wrong in hopes that others will do better as a result of them.

Remembering our good and our not so good memories are an important part of who we are. The act of remembering is also integral to the life of a Jew. In Hebrew the term for memory is *zicharon*. Rosh Hashanah, our Jewish New Year, that we observed ten days ago, is also called *Yom Hazikaron*, day of remembering. Throughout our High Holy Day period, we ask that God remembers the goodness and piety of our ancestors. We say, *zochreinu l'chayim*, remember us for life. We remind God of the faith of Abraham, in hopes for some *z'chut*, some merit for us, as his and Sarah's descendants. Even one of the three series of the shofar blowing is called, *zichronot* for God to remember us and our deeds. And then we have *Yitzkor*, "May God remember," our memorial to those who have passed away.

We are a people who like to reminisce. We recount our Exodus out of Egypt every Passover and re-live our people's suffering and then liberation out of enslavement. Our Torah is read, re-read and read again, every single year. We study the creation of our world, the flood in the time of Noah, the conflict between Joseph and his brothers, our descent into Egypt, the

taskmasters, the plagues, our freedom, the revelation of Torah at Sinai, and the forty years in the wilderness. We recall our people's history as we traversed the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, Asia, South and North America. We remember our loved ones and name our children for people we cherished. Our memories as Jews goes back thousands of years.

I've long been intrigued with our mind and how it works. The French philosopher, Descartes, famously said, "I think therefore I am," as a way of equating self-awareness with being. Our minds, our thoughts, and our memories are essential parts of what makes us who we are. As long as we are alive and conscious, we will have thoughts, ideas, and insights throughout every day. Memories, though, are different. How we remember and how easily we forget can have a significant impact on us.

As I grow older, I am more aware of the changes in my retention. When my son Shane was a child, he liked to play memory games. We would take the deck of cards and lay them face down on the floor. We would then flip them over, one at a time to try to find matches. His memory was very good and I was determined not to be outdone by a child. I arranged the cards carefully in rows and columns and worked hard to memorize what card was in each quadrant. Shane, in the meantime, would alternate his attention between the cards and his Lego creation by the fireplace. At the end, I had two more pairs than he did. Victory for the older adult! Yes, however, I realized how hard won it was. I had to give it my A game while Shane basically phoned it in. Was it possible that my memory wasn't as good as it used to be, I wondered?

My brother Bennett who is a neurologist decisively stated that my wining by only a couple of pairs wasn't as much of a triumph as I thought. He pointed out that given my age, my memory was certainly less than it used to be. Sigh, that wasn't what I wanted to hear. Truth be told, I can tell that my ability to find the right word or to remember a specific date or detail isn't like it was in my twenties. Yes, as we age, our ability to remember does indeed change.

Neuroscientist Dr. Charan Ranganath, author of Why We Remember, points out how our prefrontal cortex changes as we grow older making it harder for us to remember not because we can't form memories but rather because it's harder to focus our attention. We are just more easily distracted as we age. However, it's not just us middle agers or seniors who struggle to retain information, forgetfulness can plague those who are younger as well.

This is the season for confession. And so, how many of you struggle to remember the name of someone you were only introduced to moments before? How many of you forget where you put your keys, phone, or wallet? Do you ever go into a room and struggle to remember what you were looking for? An affirmative answer doesn't mean that it's time to be committed to a care facility. These are all normal things and not indicative of anything serious or compromising.

Ranganath asserts that our brains are not designed to remember everything. He says our focus on forgetting things is rooted in misconceptions of how our brain works.<sup>2</sup> We aren't supposed to remember everything from our past. Instead, we are designed to remember events that are important to us. And this is why he focuses his book on why we remember. Ranganath writes, "Forgetting isn't a failure of memory; it's a consequence of processes that allow our brains to prioritize information that helps us navigate and make sense of the world."<sup>3</sup> Can you imagine if our brains were full of every single thing we thought or experienced? It would be a jumbled mess in our heads. And so, instead our brains keep those elements that are most important for us. He writes, "Memory is much, much more than an archive of the past; it is the prism through which we see ourselves, others, and the world. It's the connective tissue underlying what we say, think, or do."<sup>4</sup>

Now, before I go any further, I want to acknowledge that there are neurological conditions where our memory and cognitive functions deteriorate such as with dementia and Alzheimer's. These are troubling conditions, to be sure. They rob us of our loved ones before they are gone and many of us fear having such a diagnosis. For what it's worth, I have noticed for those with such conditions, that they can still have quality of life. They can enjoy the company of others, physical pleasures such as eating and physical affection, and music can be very moving and even conjure up lost memories. But this sermon isn't about the loss of memory to this degree but rather it's for the majority of us who know it's important and struggle with it.

Ranganath points out Professor Endel Tulving's teaching that people have two kinds of memory. "He coined the term *episodic memory* to describe the kind of remembering that allows us to call back, and even re-experience, events from the past. Tulving proposed that episodic memory can be differentiated from *semantic memory*, our ability to recall facts or knowledge of the world, regardless of when and where that information was learned."<sup>5</sup> And so, studying for a test and remembering facts, theories, and timelines would be considered semantic memory.

On the other hand, going back in time by recalling the neighborhood of our childhood is an episodic memory. This kind of memory can teach us to avoid mistakes of the past, orient ourselves to the present, and as Ranganath states, "By recalling past moments of compassion, wisdom, perseverance, or courage, we can use our connection with the past to broaden our sense of what we can do and who we can be."<sup>6</sup> It is this kind of memory that many of us can be quite good at. Episodic memory helps us understand who we were and also who we are now as well. It is powerful.

Many of us can get frustrated though at the ordinary things that we forget. Ranganath emphasizes that there are things that can impede our memory and things that can strengthen it. To no one's surprise, we are less likely to remember an event or information, if we are distracted. And so, if we are sitting in a lecture or sermon, and we are checking our email or Instagram

accounts, our attention will not be focused. I'm not trying to out any of you at this moment, by the way. Ranganath asserts the constant buzzing of our notifications makes it harder to remember what we were thinking or doing. We are living in a time of constant distraction and this can impede even the cognitive abilities of our youth. And so, being mindful, putting away those things that can distract us, can help us remember a conversation or an event.

Also, Ranganath mentions taking what he calls mindless photos and quickly posting them can detract from us actually remembering an event. He describes one of his daughter's birthday parties where he was constantly trying to take pictures and videos. As weeks and months went by, he lamented that he wasn't able to remember the details of it, like other birthdays. He writes, "Mindlessly documenting events can lead us to disengage from the cues we need to form the kinds of distinctive memories that help us rise above interference."<sup>7</sup> I have noticed for myself as well when I'm trying to get everyone looking up, getting the right angle, that I am not fully present. He points out that by being aware of the smells, sounds, and sights, we are more likely to imprint the memory.

There are many ways and techniques to improve one's recollection. We can group information and use acronyms or patterns to help us recall things. I often will tell myself, for example, that I need to pick up three things at the store. I can remember the number and eventually I will remember the actual items. We can create a schema, a mental framework to organize information such as forming a map of a place in our minds or running through a sequence of an event. Also being patient with ourselves when we cannot remember something immediately. He writes, "A great deal of everyday forgetting happens not because our memories have disappeared but because we can't find our way back to them. In the right context, however, memories that have seemed long gone can suddenly resurface back to the forefront of our recall."<sup>8</sup> This is why that name or detail will come to us later on.

We also know that by going back and retracing our steps, we will more likely recall our memory of where we put the keys, phone, or wallet. Eating healthy and exercise are helpful but nothing is as good as a good night's sleep. I barely remember the days, weeks, and nights after my children were born. They both had various ailments such as colic, chronic ear infections, and reflux and thus sleep was elusive in my household. I was up so many times during the night that I couldn't even concentrate enough to read the paper. My memory and mind at that time was terrible.

Another pointer is to know that we are more likely to identify people if we see them in the same context. For example, you will easily identify me here at the Temple but if you see me at the gym and you are not used to seeing me in my ponytail, you may struggle with initially recognizing me. This is why when we see our teacher at a restaurant or our co-worker at a baseball game, their name may not immediately come up.

Context and environment does matter when it comes to memory. Our senses such as sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch can be powerful triggers for memory. If we smell a wonderful marinara sauce, we may be more likely to remember that pasta dinner in the south of Italy than if we hadn't had the sensory reminder. Memory is quite fascinating, don't you think?

And so, being forgetful is no cause for alarm. Our brains are incredible instruments that help us retain important aspects of our past, help us learn, orient us in time, and define who we are. We can work towards remembering more by being present, focusing our attention, and limiting distraction. Really, we have so much to gain by putting aside our addictive phones, taking a break from social media, emails, and texts. What would it be like if we are having dinner with a friend or family member and we don't look at our phone even once? Not even to take a picture. Crazy, I know.

We can be more forgiving of ourselves, if we understand that we aren't going to remember every detail or thing that happens to us. We can improve our retention by striving for a good night's sleep or as much sleep as is possible. We can utilize mental techniques to remember more things, and sometimes accept that the name or information will come back to us later on. And we can redefine ourselves through recalling our episodic, our experiential memories of our past.

Memory is not only important for us as individuals but as for us as a people. Jews constantly recall and remind ourselves of our rich history because it helps us understand who we are today and gives our lives meaning. There's a sense of belonging when we tell our people's ancient stories and our link with those who have gone before us is strengthened. But it's not just about the past, it's about how we understand who we are and our place in this world. We as individuals have incredible memories, our personal family accounts are invaluable, and the stories of our people give us a timeless place in history.

And so, if a Genie were to come and give us the choice to forget our past, I would hope we would all decline such an offer. We could use our magical wishes in more important ways.

Tonight, let us pray that God will remember us with merit and give us the ability to enjoy our past, be fully present in the here and now, and look forward to joy and meaning in our future.

## Notes

1 <https://upjoke.com/memory-jokes>

2 Why We Remember by Charan Ranganath pg. 4

3 “ “ pg. 30

4 “ “ Pg. 6

5 pg 33

6 pg. 49

7 pg. 29

8 pg. 32