

“Memory”

Kol Nidre Sermon
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Although I was a history major in college, most of my knowledge of early American history comes from the musical Hamilton. That might be true for some of you as well. This amazing musical transports the audience back to the late 1700's and early 1800's giving us a glimpse into historical events and putting us into “the room where it happened.” And, although we were not alive during the founding of our country, it almost feels like we were there.

The act of remembering, even though we were not physically there, is central to our Jewish life and history. We weren't there when we left Egypt, but the Passover seder with its symbols and stories transports us back in time. We did not stand at the edge of the Promised Land listening to Moses' last speeches, but we read them in our yearly Torah cycle, placing ourselves in the footprints of our ancestors. We were not threatened by Haman's evil decree, but we tell the story during Purim each year and celebrate as our ancestors did, as if we ourselves were saved.

Jewish memory, preserved in the Torah and in our traditions, is essential to who we are. Yet our memories are not complete, our traditions are not comprehensive. We can not and do not remember every historic triumph and tragedy that Jews have ever experienced. That would be too much, even for a historically minded, tradition-loving people. If we regularly remembered all the tragedies that befell our people, we would be overwhelmed.

But that is just what is happening, not Jewishly, but in our larger 24/7 news coverage of disasters command our time and attention. All this technology is both a blessing and a curse. Anyone old enough to remember \$1 per minute long-distance calls can tell you how wonderful it is to be able to call relatives abroad for free, to know what is happening in the far corners of the world, to reconnect with old friends. We feel more connected and informed, and we can virtually attend faraway family events and talk to grandchildren who live on the opposite coast. We have real memories of events that we experience virtually rather than in person.

But there is another side to our interconnection. For each feel-good moment that technology gives us there are two or maybe three or four moments that are negative. Not only are we present for events in the lives of our family or friends, we are virtually present for every breaking news story. When the school shooting happened in Parkland, Florida, I was with my family on a plane flying to San Diego to visit my parents. Even at 30,000 feet in the air we were not immune from the tragedy. I innocently turned on the in-flight television to watch some of the Winter Olympics and my kids and I was bombarded by breaking news reports. Even though I didn't watch much of the reporting, I turned the television back on every 45 minutes or so to see if there were any updates. There were not. For hours the networks breathlessly reported the exact same news, showed the same ten minutes of footage, and re-interviewed the same experts.

This kind of intense news coverage, hour after hour, creates the feeling that *we were there*. It creates a memory, and sometimes even the trauma of events we did not experience. Was the Parkland shooting tragic? Yes. It was unspeakably awful. Yet it did not happen to us, or in our neighborhood, or even our state. Nonetheless, the ubiquitous coverage makes it feel as if it *did* happen to us. The Parkland shooting, the flooding in the Carolinas, wildfires in California, terrorist attacks in France . . . we see so much tragedy everywhere, all the time. The trauma we feel about such events can grow out of proportion to our actual experience of them. A National Institutes of Health review of 36 studies found that there is a relationship between viewing disasters on television and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.¹ A study after the Boston Marathon bombing found that those

1 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4144190/>

who spent more than six hours a day watching media coverage suffered more powerful stress reactions than did people who were directly involved but watched less news coverage of the events. Let me repeat that. People who watched television coverage of the event were more traumatized than those who were actually there.² We have traumatic responses to events that we never experienced!

Jewish tradition teaches us quite a bit about historic memory and trauma and how to commemorate and to move forward. After all, we have had our share of tragedies. The most devastating losses in ancient Jewish life were the destruction of First and Second Temples. The destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE also meant the destruction of the Southern Kingdom of Israel and exile in Babylonia for most of the Jewish people. We returned and rebuilt a generation later, but in 60 CE the Temple was destroyed again, this time by the Romans. The Northern Kingdom was annihilated and we were all exiled, not to return for almost 2,000 years. How did we as a people deal with the memory of these historic traumas?

First, we mourned. In our liturgical calendar the three weeks leading up to Tisha B'Av, the date of the destruction, are times of semi-mourning. Tisha B'Av itself is the only 25-hour fast day other than today, Yom Kippur. We read the book of Lamentations, which chronicles our destruction in disturbing detail:

I'm the man who has seen trouble,
trouble coming from the lash of God's anger.
He took me by the hand and walked me
into pitch-black darkness.
Yes, he's given me the back of his hand
over and over and over again.
He turned me into a scarecrow
of skin and bones, then broke the bones.
He hemmed me in, ganged up on me,
poured on the trouble and hard times.
He locked me up in deep darkness,
like a corpse nailed inside a coffin. (Lamentations 3:1-6; The Message Translation)

Horrible and dark. This sounds like an abusive relationship between us and God. "He has given me the back of his hand over and over and over again." Haven't we all felt like this sometimes? Don't we feel beaten down? We know what it is like to be locked in deep darkness. The text reflects not only the experiences of our ancestors, but our experiences today.

And then, something remarkable happens. As we sit in sorrow, our texts urge us to get up and move forward even if we want to stay put. A mere 16 verses after we are pictured as corpses buried in a coffin, the author tells us, "God's loyal love couldn't have run out; God's merciful love couldn't have dried up (Lamentations 3:22)." What? We don't feel that way. Go away and let us sit in our darkness. But, the text whispers to us, even in the most difficult of times, have hope.

That is what we as a people have done, even when the very worst happened. After mourning the destruction of the Temple, we innovated. Community leaders created rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism we now practice that is centered on prayer rather than sacrifice and doesn't require us to go to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship. Not only did they create a whole new Judaism, they gave that new Judaism they created canonical status. The Talmud records the debates the rabbis engaged in and says that those very debates were given to Moses at Mount Sinai, just as the Torah was. The rabbis had the audacity not only to innovate, but to claim that their innovation was given by God.

Remarkably, that idea is still with us today. We respond to tragedies with action. If they are of our own making, we innovate, trying to find solutions. If they are natural disasters, we look at our responses and see how we can do better. And we find the positive, the stories of those who help, the courageous stories of survival. The

2 <http://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sci-media-coverage-trauma-stress-20131209-story.html#>

rescue of the Thai boys soccer team trapped in the cave captivated the world and we rejoiced when they were freed. We use all our ingenuity and resolve to solve the problem right then or to try to make sure we do better next time.

So, in the face of massive historic tragedy, Jews mourn and innovate if possible. And we move on. But what about lesser traumas, like those we commonly watch on TV or read about in the newspaper? How do we, as outsiders, respond to the memories of those events? After all, these are the events that capture our attention and cause us to worry day to day. During just a few days in August when I began writing this sermon, here is just a partial list of the breaking news that I read about: an abuse scandal in the Catholic church in Pennsylvania involving more than 1000 children, the hospitalization of more than 70 people in one day due to marijuana laced with fentanyl, the death of Aretha Franklin, massive wildfires in California, the death of a worker at Disneyworld in an industrial accident, a man drowning in debt killing his wife and two young children. Even on a smaller scale, we can see the devastation described by the poet of Lamentations. Certainly we need to know about nationwide traumatic events, but it is these smaller tragedies that take over our news feed. They are the continually breaking news that doesn't really deserve the banner, but gets it to drive more traffic to the news site. How do we respond to the memories of these smaller scale events?

Judaism has these smaller scale tragedies as well. In fact, we read about some of them during the High Holidays. We aren't a people who shy away from the messy or difficult in life. In the Torah portions for Rosh Hashanah, we read about the almost sacrifice of Isaac and how Sarah and Abraham expelled Hagar and her son Ishmael. These are difficult, uncomfortable episodes from our text, yet we don't hide them away. We read them every year during our High Holidays, the days when the most people are here to listen to them. Why not have an uplifting reading? Do we really need to be reminded that after our ancestors expelled Hagar she set Ishmael down in the shadow of a bush and walked away so she would not have to watch him die? Is it necessary to relive Isaac's trauma, an event so awful that the midrash tells us Sarah died upon hearing what Abraham had almost done?

Despite the darkness of these texts, our tradition finds the positive in both of these stories. Hagar's prayer is answered and she is not only saved, but given a blessing, one of the few women in our tradition to receive a blessing from God. The midrash pictures Isaac as a willing participant in the *akedah*, wanting to prove his love for his father and for God. We sound the ram's horn to remind God of what Abraham was willing to do and ask God to have mercy on us for Abraham's sake. We read some of the most disturbing chapters in our sacred text, we confront them, and then we turn them to the good. Abraham was willing to do this unspeakable act to his son. Because of that, God, you owe us, today. Let his willingness be for our merit. What chutzpah! In Judaism, we do not simply remember the trauma; instead, we use what happened and try to turn it to the good.

But too often today we elevate the disturbing without moving on. Too often we feel like the poet of Lamentations--we are getting hit again and again. Our obsession with the news is not making us more informed or more likely to act. It is making us feel depressed, incapable of acting. How many times did you turn off the television or get off of Facebook and think to yourself, "Oh, I feel so much better?" How often did a breaking news update help to calm you or to move you to action? This is not a call for indifference to the world around us. We can not and should not close our eyes to the horrors we see. But we are sitting in that horror, every day, at the bottom of a pit and feeling unable to get out. We are remembering and reliving an endless series of traumatic events that DID NOT HAPPEN TO US.

Judaism provides a solution. Remember and mourn for an appropriate period, but do not sit in your mourning forever. Get up, shake off the dust, and move on. Innovate, and act if you can. May this be a year of us saying 'no' to being too involved in the events we do not experience. To saying no to imagining ourselves in tragedy. No to making ourselves a part of a traumatic narrative that is not ours.

As the psalmist in Ecclesiastes tells us "A season is set for everything and a time for every experience under heaven.....a time for weeping and a time for laughing. A time for wailing and a time for dancing. (Ecc. 3:1, 4)." We have done too much weeping and wailing. This is the time for dancing and laughing.

Interestingly, Jewish tradition does not tell us we were all present at the traumatic events we discussed. We did not witness Isaac's almost sacrifice or the destruction of the Temples. We were not even there when we left Egypt, although we recreate that experience every year. The Talmud tells us that we were all physically present at only one very specific time: the revelation at Sinai when we entered into the covenant with God. We were there not for the death and destruction of our people, but when we received the laws. We were there for the time of covenant, the time of joy, and the time of hope. That is what we should remember.

We have a beautiful principle in Judaism that we end our readings on a positive note, not a negative one. The last verse of the book of Lamentations, mourning the destruction of the Temple reads "For truly, You have rejected us, Bitterly raged against us." But we don't end our public reading with that verse. Instead we reread the verse just above it, which will sound familiar to many of you.

“אֵלֶיךָ וְנִשְׁיָבָה חַדָּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקִדְמָם | הַשִּׁיבֵנו יְהוָה | Take us back, O God, to Yourself, And let us come back; Renew our days as of old!” What a fitting verse for this time of year. We are ready to come back, to start again, to embrace the joy and the love and the hope. May it be so.