

Remembering Together

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The celebration of Pesah is an outstanding example of the central role that memory plays in Jewish tradition. Underscoring the importance of memory for sustaining human societies, Elie Wiesel wrote, “Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future.” Communal memory, of course, goes far beyond what any one individual can remember and experience. And yet, what makes memory so powerful as a vehicle for communal identity is that it speaks to us on a personal level. Wiesel’s writings on the Holocaust are a powerful example. Knowing the historical record of the Nazi genocide is indispensable, but it is the personal tales of suffering that penetrate our souls. Communal memory is fundamentally interpersonal: it is widely shared and deeply personal.

As I approach the eighth day of Pesah this year, I have been thinking a great deal about the relationship between personal and shared memory. My mother passed away this past October after a year-long battle with cancer, and the eighth day of Pesah will be the first Yizkor service I attend to fulfill a sacred responsibility to remember her life. The moment of reciting the Yizkor prayer is a very personal one, but I have been struck these last few months by how much my memory of my mother has now been infused with the memories others have shared with me. When I enter the Yizkor service my personal memories of my mother will now be intermingled with those shared with me by others.

My mother was a successful attorney who mentored many younger lawyers, women in particular, and made significant contributions in service to the profession. I have long known about her relationships and accomplishments and even know some of her colleagues personally. In that sense, none of the stories people shared with me when she died were particularly surprising. At the same time, I found myself a bit

overwhelmed and deeply moved as I watched others mourn for her, expressing their gratitude for her support, advice, and friendship over the years. I still think of my mother as the one who baked my birthday cakes, planned family vacations, and took me shopping for clothes. Now, the memories of others have become integrated with mine in a new way. Now, my mother is also the consummate mentor, advocate for gender and racial equity, and exemplar of professional integrity. The miracle of memory is that these personal accounts from different people come together and form a new whole.

The process of gathering shared memories into a new whole is also how the Jewish people builds its communal memory from one generation to the next. Every communal memory begins as a personal encounter with another person—or perhaps with God. Even the teachings of Moses are anchored in his experience of growing from an impulsive young person to a more mature (though sometimes still impulsive) leader. As we recite each year at the seder, every person must view themselves as if they themselves left Egypt. In other words, the shared communal memory takes root within each one of us as a personal memory.

In the Torah reading for the eighth day of Pesah, we read from the book of Deuteronomy’s holiday calendar. Speaking of the commandment to eat matzah for the seven days of the holiday (in the land of Israel), the Torah states that the purpose of the commandments is “so that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt all the days of your life.” That phrasing becomes the basis for a well-known passage in the Mishnah which we recite in the Haggadah:

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah stated: I am approximately 70 years old and I have never

been privileged to mention the Exodus from Egypt at night until Ben Zoma offered this interpretation: “so that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt all the days of your life.” “The days of your life” refers to the daytime, “All the days of your life” refers to the night.

The context for this teaching is a halakhic discussion about the recitation of the third paragraph of the Shema, which is about tzitzit, the fringes of a *tallit*, and also mentions the Exodus. The obligation to wear these fringes only applies during the daytime because one must see them. Ben Zoma’s teaching suggests that even though the practice of wearing tzitzit only applies during daytime, one must nonetheless include this paragraph when one recites the Shema at night.

I also read Ben Zoma’s midrash as a teaching about how personal memory crystallizes into communal shared memory. When we recite this passage in the Haggadah, it underscores the significance of telling the story of the Exodus at night around a family or communal table. In the light of day, most of us can navigate the world with comfort, ease, and security. We may not feel we need the strength and company of others. But in the dark of nighttime, we may feel vulnerable, insecure, or lost. It is precisely in these moments when we seek connection to others who share our struggles. For me, this shared memory came about as I mourned my mother’s loss with others. For the Jewish people, we return to the narrative of the Exodus each year to mingle our shared struggles with each other to pass that shared memory on to the next generation.

Judaism is not a religion of the individual, but it is a religion that values and affirms the unique experience of each individual. We don’t suffer, struggle, or mourn alone, nor do we experience redemption alone. Instead, we share our stories with each other, and our stories become a part of one another’s. And when we hear each other’s stories, we each contribute to a shared memory that provides spiritual nourishment and hope.