

Evoking that memory daily does far more than strengthen our identity as Jews. It reminds us to greet the day with gratitude and hope. It prepares our hearts and minds to empathize with the vulnerable, to value equality, freedom, and justice, and to experience pain and anger when those values are violated. It primes our consciousness to see opportunities for action and change in the world around us and within ourselves, rather than seeing inevitability and impossibility.

Most importantly, remembering the Exodus from Egypt is a daily reminder to fully embrace freedom of conscience and consciousness. It's a reminder that we have an ethical and spiritual obligation to choose our inner reality, which will in turn shape our outward behavior and ultimately our world. "Remember"—not to allow your values, your desires and needs, your attitudes, your emotions, your reactions, to be enslaved to popular culture and societal norms; instead, deliberately shape them yourself. "Remember"—not to allow yourself to be a slave even to your own past; instead, deliberately shape your memories yourself—"re-member" them, putting the pieces together in a new, healthier way.

Memory can be a very strict taskmaster or the instrument of our redemption; it can keep us stuck or propel us forward, enslave or free us. We have to choose. It takes vigilance and discipline to revise our mental maps to accord with current reality, rather than contorting reality to conform to our mental maps. But only by doing so can we be truly free. And it is all too easy to accept as inevitable whatever worldview the Pharaohs of our world are currently peddling—it requires only forgetting. But insisting on our own values, persisting in our vision of what the world could and should be, demands courage, imagination, and a good memory.

Zakhor. Remember.

The following excellent books have influenced this commentary: Joshua Foer, Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything; Yehuda Kurtzer, Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past; Avishai Margalit, The Ethics of Memory; and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory.

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Memory and the Exodus from Egypt

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זְכוֹר אֶת-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר יִצְאָתֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים כִּי בְחַזֵּק
יָד הוֹצִיאָה' אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה

Zakhor—Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, from the house of bondage, for with a mighty hand Adonai brought you forth from this . . . (Exod. 13:3).

The Exodus from Egypt is the first of several things the Torah commands us to remember (*zakhor*). What does it mean to remember, and how do we accomplish it?

In addition to the specific ritual *aides-mémoire* provided in the text itself (such as the observance of Passover [e.g. Exod. 12:14 ff.] and the wearing of tefillin [Exod. 13:9 ff.]), many authorities inferred from the *zakhor* command an obligation to mention the Exodus out loud, every day. Because of this, the tradition developed of reciting a list of the various things the Torah commands us to remember at the conclusion of the morning prayers. The most common version, known as the *Shesh Zekhirot* ("Six Remembrances"), contains:

1. the Exodus from Egypt (citing Deut. 16:3)
2. standing at Sinai (Deut. 4:9-10)
3. the incident with Amalek (Deut. 25:17-19)
4. the Golden Calf (Deut. 9:7)
5. when Miriam was punished for speaking ill of Moses (Deut. 24:9)
6. Shabbat (Exod. 20:8)

With all due wariness about the dangers of reductionism, the list itself is a pretty compelling curriculum for basic Jewish literacy, comprising core components of Jewish narrative and identity.

But beyond the specifics of *what* we are to remember, the very notion of remembering as a religious obligation—and a spiritual, intellectual, and ethical practice—is itself unusual, even extraordinary.

On the most obvious level, we're commanded to remember because we human beings tend to forget. Of course we forget trivialities (where did I put my keys?), and that can be frustrating. But we also forget essential things—our values, our place in the world, our humility or our nobility, our identities, our mission—and that can be devastating. Especially when we're angry or frightened, or distracted or manipulated, we can easily fall prey to becoming, in Abraham Joshua Heschel's words, "a messenger who forgot the message." So a daily spiritual practice of calling to mind some of the key elements of our identity and purpose (mostly through narratives, which are easier to remember) makes sense.

But the command to remember—and the practice of the "Six Remembrances"—isn't only about the danger of forgetting. It's about a religious obligation to consciously shape our consciousness.

In its broadest sense, the Exodus reminds us that change is possible; both individually and societally, who we were yesterday need not dictate who we are today. But that freedom to change and evolve doesn't come automatically. It's hard-won, demanding constant internal vigilance and work.

We know that we don't wake each morning as blank slates, objectively experiencing a brand-new world, entirely free to choose who and how to be today, or what to think and believe. Among the most powerful things that dictate our current reality is our past experience—our memories. Whether we're conscious of it or not, the way we perceive and respond to the present is always filtered through and shaped by the past. We see what *is* through our memories of what *was*.

But it turns out that the influence goes both ways. Current cognitive research reveals that human memory is fluid and continually evolving. A memory isn't like a document we pull up on our computer screen and close again, unchanged. Rather, every time we evoke a memory, we change it. Thus, our memories not only *shape* our current experience, they are also *shaped by* our current experience, in a continuous feedback loop.

The Torah and Jewish tradition have long intuited this, understanding that memory is different from history. Jewish memory makes no claim to consistency, completeness, or objectivity. It is brazenly and proudly

subjective, selective, and ever evolving. For us, memory is an active process of shaping the past to create a meaningful present and a more hopeful future, the practice of reciting "Six Remembrances" being a prime example. History is right or wrong, true or false. Memory is alive or dead, contiguous or broken, meaningful or empty, helpful or destructive.

Perhaps then, the fact that the first command to remember relates to the Exodus from Egypt is no mere accident of narrative chronology. Remembering is part and parcel of the Exodus, because active remembering—consciously shaping our consciousness—is essential to freedom.

The internal feedback loop of past and present tends to be self-confirming and self-reinforcing. So, when we allow it to proceed unconsciously and undirected, our worldview can get stuck in a self-reinforcing pattern, with no real learning. Any false inferences we've drawn, untruths we've come to believe, distortions in our perceptions of self and other, will go unchallenged. As a result, we will continue to see only what we already believe, without even being aware of it, and we will be in "Egypt."

That's why propaganda has been a tool of enslavement by Pharaohs in every generation, the Russian effort to shape Americans' opinions through deceptive social media posts being a recent example. Merely learning that "information" we once read and believed was falsehood, calculated to enflame our fear and anger, is insufficient to alleviate the impact of those falsehoods. Without consciously, intentionally, confronting how those falsehoods have impacted our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, they will continue to shape how we process new information, and reinforce themselves in our consciousness.

It takes particular effort to remember that we have the freedom—and therefore the responsibility—to choose what we allow to take root and remain in our memories. (Of course this freedom is not absolute; our consciousness and memory are influenced by physiological and psychological factors outside of our control. The religious obligation is therefore limited to shaping our consciousness to the extent we are able.)

That's what the *zakhor* command, and the "Six Remembrances," are all about: intentionally calling to mind certain values, practices, commitments, and warnings in order to consciously shape our consciousness, our responses, and our actions. Each item on the list is worthy of examination in its own right, but topping the list: remember the Exodus from Egypt.