

Remembering Who We Are

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The coming Shabbat is designated as Shabbat Zakhor. The word is quite prevalent in Jewish literature and thought, and its basic meaning is generally translated by the words “memory,” “remembrance,” or “memorial.” And as a people we seem always to be remembering, and exhorting others to remember. It’s at the core of what we believe to be essential in Jewish education. As Isaac Bashevis Singer once remarked: “Jews suffer from many diseases, but amnesia is not one of them.”¹

But what are we to be remembering? The late Rabbi Harold Schulweis, a true moral hero, wrote the following in an essay some years ago:

“I remember that whenever Reb Shapiro, our Talmud Torah teacher, was angry at us kids he would drop his chalk and begin his sarcastic tirade: ‘*Sure, boys, go ahead and talk, play games, don’t pay me any attention. For this our ancestors died to preserve the holy text? For this they suffered from anti-Semites, so that you should talk and fool around?*’ Reb Shapiro’s diatribe worked. We all felt properly guilty. We stopped snapping rubber bands, and paid him mock attention, but . . . [it] did not work for too long . . . This kind of scare may work once, twice, three times, but sooner or later it proves counterproductive and is resented as manipulative and insincere . . . Jews can’t be scared into life.”²

Remembrance in Jewish circles is usually not so much about God, Torah, ritual, culture, nor even ethics; it is much

more about victimization, which let us stipulate is real and not invented. But still, say the words “Jewish remembrance,” or “*zakhor*,” or perhaps the Yiddish “*gedenk*,” to yourself, and wait for images to appear. They are quite likely to include some selection of barbed wire, railroad tracks, selection platforms, and/or armed soldiers threatening helpless innocents. Try it on Google Images (best to spell it “*zachor*”) and see what you get.

It is true, of course, that there are more than enough events of horror and destruction in our past to darken our thoughts. We all know that, nor can we avert our attention from that. Surely not today, when there is more hostility being expressed toward Jews and Judaism than anyone can make their peace with. But if Schulweis is correct—and as an educator, as a rabbi, and as a parent and grandparent, I am certain that he is—then we had better expand our understanding of just what this imperative of *zakhor* is. Because, as he put it, “To be an anti-anti-Semite does not make you a Jew. It robs you of Jewish song and poetry, Jewish philosophy and Jewish joy.”

A tradition begun by the mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria is to recite six biblical injunctions of remembrances—*Zekhirot*—each day. Three of them do indeed, and rightly so, focus us on moments of negative valence: The communal failure of faith in the wilderness. The individual moral failure of Miriam—standing in for all of us—in casting aspersions on her own brother Moses. And most prominent is what we will remind ourselves of on Shabbat, i.e., the threatened destruction of the people by the ancient Amalekites. We are enjoined to remember all of those.

¹ Interview with Sander Gilman, *Diacritics*, Vol 4, No. 1 (Spring 1974), p. 33.

² *In God’s Mirror: Reflections and Essays* (Jersey City: Ktav, 2003), p.71.

But they are not all. Because the other three are remembrances of an entirely different kind: Remembering the day we left Egypt. Remembering the day we stood at Mount Sinai. And remembering Shabbat. Note well: **we are not enjoined to remember the *slavery* in Egypt.** We are obligated to remember the day we *left*. A day on which we had no real past, but only a future, a yet-to-be-realized potential, spreading out before us—as was the case at Mount Sinai. A people with no past culture or structure, now first receiving the gift of a blueprint for what was to come for them. And remembering Shabbat is perhaps the most primal of all. It takes us back to when God completed God's solo part in creation, and having just created the human race, invited us to join in the work of building a future for the world that would reflect the peace and joy of Shabbat.

This kind of memory is what we are too short on. Remembering who we are at our core, what our potential is, and the future that we can build given our spiritual resources. It is what a mentor of mine from many years ago, Rabbi Max Arzt, of blessed memory (a former vice chancellor of JTS), once pointed out to me on a Tishah Be'av afternoon. The Book of Eichah rather surprisingly indicts Israel by saying—*Lo zakhrah aharitah*—she did not remember her future (Lam. 1:9). Rabbi Arzt called this “anticipatory memory,” and it has stayed with me ever since. We need to build as many monuments to this inner vitality of Judaism that still has so much to unfold and build in the future as we do to our moments of sorrow and loss in the past. As knowledgeable Jews, and Jewish leaders, we have to be sure to do more than take the absolutely essential care for the welfare of Jews, and their safety and security. We must also attend to the importance of anticipatory memory, that is, of knowing, understanding, and loving what Judaism means and can be in the future, and knowing how to convey that to the next generation. Even if no one were ever again to raise a threatening hand against us.