

The Past Beneath the Present

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This summer my dad turned 81 years old. He was born in Russia and raised in Poland right after the end of the Sho'ah, in which most of his family was murdered. Facing intense antisemitism in Poland when he was growing up, he and his mother traveled by boat to Canada to escape when he was a teenager. That is the extent of what I knew about his childhood for most of my life. He simply did not talk about it. It was too painful. So I grew up feeling unmoored in the world. I couldn't figure out how to move forward when so much of my past was shrouded in mystery and tinged with pain. For years I've asked him to tell me stories from his childhood. His answer is always the same: "We'll see." Or, "I need to find the photo albums." The albums, of course, remain unfound. Beyond wanting to preserve family history for future generations, I have another reason for asking. I began noticing my own reactivity. Antisemitism took not only the lives of my ancestors but also my ability to know them. Their stories



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and even their names remain hidden. So every headline, every hateful comment, every careless remark lands with disproportionate force. I am not just responding to the present. I am reacting to a past I have never been able to fully grieve.

Reactivity is not born in the moment. It is the activation of something much older and deeper. The work of Elul invites us to trace these activations through *heshbon hanefesh* (spiritual accounting). We often imagine this accounting as a record of our actions: Whom have I hurt? Where did I stray from my values? Where do I need to

make repairs? But before we can answer these questions, we need to ask another: Who is the person answering them? What are the stories that have shaped my soul? The goal is not to remain trapped in the past, but to give it enough time and attention that it no longer unconsciously determines the present.

If Elul is asking us to take inventory of the stories that shape our souls, the Torah offers us a model of how to do it. In Deuteronomy 26, the Israelites receive instructions on what to do when they first enter the Promised Land, beginning with the ritual of the first fruits. They are to take some of each of the first fruits of the land, bring them to the *kohen* (the priest), and recite a declaration that is familiar to many of us.

אֲרָמִי אֲבִד אֲבִי יֶרֶד מִצְרָיִם וַיְגֵר שָׁם בְּמִתִּי מֵעֶט וְיֵהִי־שָׁם לְגֹי גְדֹל עַצֹּם וְרֹב

"My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation." (Deut. 26:5)

This declaration, which we also read each year in the Haggadah during Pesah, continues on to tell the history of the Israelites and their journey: their slavery in Egypt, their crying out to the Holy One, their freedom by God's hand, and their arrival to this land flowing with milk and honey. The juxtaposition is striking: The Israelites have harvested the first fruits, these symbols of the future emerging from the land that they have been searching for for 40 years. Yet before they can enjoy these fruits, they must acknowledge the journey that has brought them there. But our traumas, like the generational experience of antisemitism, have made this examination increasingly difficult. Our experience of antisemitism, when we let it, disrupts the transmission of Jewish memory, leaving us with inherited grief instead of inherited stories. Many people, like my dad, survive by containing these painful memories and hoping they never surface. But what's kept hidden rarely disappears. Instead, it quietly shapes the way we encounter the present.

Mishnah Bikkurim 3:7 describes the recitation of *אֶרְמִי אֲבִד אֶבְי*, explaining that those who knew the declaration would recite it themselves. Those who did not know it would first hear it recited by another, then repeat it out loud. When I imagine this scene, I see myself and my father in both of these roles. In one sense, I am the one who does not know how to recite, because I literally do not know the story of my family. I need him to recite it first, so I can learn it and begin to recite it on my own. And in another sense, he is the one who does not know how to recite. After a lifetime of repressing his memories, he does not know how to begin reopening them. It breaks my heart to know how much he has carried alone, and that the weight of that pain has also become a barrier between me and my family's history. So I will keep gently nudging him. Every Sunday evening when we FaceTime, no matter what his answer was the week before, I will ask again for a story. I will ask in the hopes that I can tell a story each day as I bring forth my own offerings that include all the pieces that have shaped my soul. Perhaps the work of Elul is this: to give our stories the time and attention they need so they no longer dictate our reactions but instead become sources of wisdom. Only then can we step into our promised land.

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