

Remember to Forget
Parashat Tetzaveh; Shabbat Zachor
February 27, 2015

A member of our congregation told me recently – and I use examples about individuals you might know only with their explicit permission, so he knows that I am sharing this with you tonight – a member of our congregation told me that, when he began his studies at a fairly elite college, he decided he would no longer take notes in class. He would just... listen carefully. He did... very well in college, and has done quite well since. This is a sign, I thought, of an amazing and well-ordered mind. It speaks, as well, to a terrific marriage... of memory, and will.

My friends, it is the Shabbat before Purim, the occasion on which we look back, and we remember. We remember what it was like, once, when we were tiny and vulnerable, a story in which our fate was determined by chance, and we were saved by a stroke of fortune, timing, placement, the confluence of coincidence. If the king had not thrown out his first queen, if Esther had not won, if Mordecai had not been where he was to overhear a plot against the crown, if if if... We remember that once our lives were saved by luck. If fate is so fickle perhaps the only ritual response is, indeed, to get so smashed that while we begin the evening in remembrance, we end it with the blurring of lines, the inability to hear or recount or recall what was up and who was who. This is a season which is all about both memory, and forgetfulness.

The Purim instinct to remember is carried forth not just for all Jews, in this general holiday, but for particular communities, in their own individual histories. Throughout the Jewish world there are, actually, mini-Purims in addition to this one, times when a community was threatened, was somehow saved, and remembers its story through a vehicle modeled on, and named after, this Purim we all share.

And more. This day, this Shabbat before Purim is actually called... Shabbat Zachor, the Sabbath of Remembrance. "*Zachor et asher lecha Amalek*," we find, traditionally, in the Maftir for this Shabbat, the "additional" Torah reading that Reform congregations sometimes refer to but rarely actually read. "Remember what Amalek did to you" – Amalek, that anticipatory ancestor of Haman – how he attacked us from behind, and showed us no mercy. Remember, do not forget! Stay vigilant, be watchful, be strong against our adversaries.

Need I remind anyone where the story of Purim took place? It was Persia. It was Medea. It is Iran.

This coming week, from Sunday afternoon through Tuesday night, I will be at the annual AIPAC Policy Conference downtown, just a few miles from here. What is clear in advance is that this is a time fraught with tension, with competing narratives, an unusual and possibly unprecedented level of conflict between the United States and Israel, policy all tangled up in politics and an election campaign – and, again, an anxious eye cast towards Iran. In parsing

out what to do and how to do it, we remember every move, every injustice against us, every attack and betrayal. AIPAC may claim to be bipartisan – and for Israel’s future, and ours, it had better live up to that – but I am reminded that it is an elephant which supposedly never forgets. Show no weakness, because we remember. Make no concessions, because of what has happened before. Shout louder and wave your arms and point fingers, at anyone who doesn’t remember the way you do.

My friends, I have one point, one observation, and one conclusion to share, which I think are important – not only for Jewish life, but in our personal lives as well.

The point is this: In remembering, we honor the victims of yesterday. But we also shape our story, and engage in a push and pull about tomorrow. What we remember is where we come from, and it is who we were, but it need not be all of who we are, or where we go from here. I recall a Palestinian woman I was friendly with in college. When we spoke about history, we saw the world in completely different ways. We were on different planets; we thought we were talking about the same physical place but it was a vastly different psychic space. Why, how, in what way were we even able to be friends? Partly because when we spoke about tomorrow, we found ourselves, then, in nearly complete agreement. Although. That was, hard as it is to admit, more than 30 years ago already. Would we still agree about tomorrow, today?

The observation is that what we remember... might not be real.

Questions abound about the story told in the book of Esther. There is no king of that name, per se, no extra-Biblical evidence of these events and, indeed, the very names of the hero and heroine – Mordecai and Esther – echo not with Jewish resonance but to pagan lore... they are derived from the Babylonian gods Marduk and Ishtar, raising questions about whether this was originally a Jewish story at all.

But we tell the story – some years in English, some years partly chanted in Hebrew, most years through the lens of a parody and masquerade. This story, even more than most but symbolic of all memory, perhaps, is a tale which unfolds in wrinkles and ripples, in which revelation and discovery and meaning and purpose emerge only out of the hidden and the misdirected, out of waves of distortion.

The name of Esther, were it to have been Hebrew and not Persian in origin, would actually mean “hidden.” It is related to the word “secret.” And, as only one of two books in the entire Hebrew Bible in which the name of God never appears, we know that we are actually meant to look for meaning, somewhere... in between. It is a very modern thing. With Purim, the medium really is the message.

We know, now, that how we tell a story, and even how we hear, shapes content – you would hear what I am saying differently if I were not using notes, not reading from a text... or if you hear it over JWASH, or if you read a copy of

this later. Reading online is a different experience than holding a paper in your hands. We rely on facts, but find them harder to share, harder to agree upon, than ever before.

And think, if you will, of the stories we tell, and the conflicts that emerge, in our own lives. In a relationship, among partners. Sometimes we hang onto every memory, recite every wrong with each new infraction. *Zachor, lo tishchach!* Remember what was done to you; do not forget! But I want to suggest that while remembrance can honor and can uplift, clinging can also hurt and harm. Would not our lives, our relationships, our marriages and families be better with a bit of balance? Not from Esther but from Ecclesiastes, and Pete Seeger: there is a time to remember. And, for the sake of a better tomorrow... there is also a time to forget. A time to hold. And a time to let go.

And the conclusion? On this Shabbat Zachor, this Sabbath of Remembrance I am prompted to ask... what is it that we remember? Because I am reminded that, in the end, and with some great minds as exceptions... people will not remember what you say. They will remember how you say it. Not what you conveyed in content. But how you made them feel.

When I am at AIPAC, and when I am with you, in politics and in personal life, my hope, my prayer, is that I may be right, but I want to be kind. Accuracy is important, but lifting each other up is more so.

In our lives there is a whole history of pain, and injustice, and suffering and woe. Remember, recall, recount... but we also have to put it in a particular place... and let it stay there. To make room for each other. To make room for tomorrow. To make room for peace, and even love.

L'chaim! We drink, and – for those who do so with traditional ingredients --not all do, for those who do, we drink and it blurs the lines of memory.

Is it any wonder? Because life needs us to remember. And it also needs us to forget.

Shabbat Shalom.