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## THERE IS NO FORGETTING IN TORAH, OR IN THE UNCONSCIOUS

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We are a people of memory. Every day, our prayers and ritual recall God's covenant with the patriarchs and with the Jewish people. We remember God's revelation through sacred history and pay special attention to the exodus from Egypt. Each week commands us to remember the Sabbath day. *Zakhor*, the imperative verb meaning "remember" comes as a clarion call. Remembering is not a passive activity; rather, it demands vigor and conviction. We feel this especially on *Parashat Zakhor* when, on the Sabbath before Purim, Jews are commanded to hear a public Torah reading recounting Amelek's evil behavior in the wilderness following the exodus. Those verses, along with only two other Biblical portions, uniquely formulate the imperative of memory in doubled language, employing verbs for "remember" and "do not forget" in the same text.

Before examining these three texts, let me consider my theme from my professional vantage as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. Memory and her partner, forgetfulness, hold endless fascination for me and my colleagues. The literature of psychoanalytic inquiry regarding the apparatus of memory is enormous and far beyond the scope of this essay. Most non-psychoanalysts are familiar with classical psychoanalytic theory apropos unconscious, preconscious and conscious realms of information. Unconscious data, whether repressed memories, feelings or perceptions, hover outside the realm of conventional mental access. We look for clues to their existence in dreams, slips of the tongue and other phenomenon. The work of decoding the unconscious is not a casual or purely intellectual endeavor. Psychoanalysis rests on the belief that bringing the unconscious to light, in other words, remembering the forgotten, the repressed, offers release from profound psychological suffering.

The preconscious, on the other hand, can be provoked to yield information. Let us try a brief experiment. Remember your first grade teacher. Close your eyes and visualize her face. Chances are that seconds before my directive, you were not thinking of that teacher and had not thought of her for some time. As of this moment, you recall not only her face, but possibly her voice, her manner

and a myriad of details about her classroom style. Most people, when prompted, can retrieve vast amounts of information from the storehouse of preconscious mind and bring it into conscious awareness. On a superficial, if highly practical level, when we instruct a child, "Remember your phone number," we tell him to store that information and to keep the series of digits accessible for deployment.

The edict "to remember," however, can imply much deeper meaning. When a command is issued such as "Remember the Alamo," "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy," or in stark reference to the Holocaust, "*Zakhor*," the intent is that the recipient of that instruction must keep his relationship to the significant national/religious event uppermost in his consciousness. His identity and conduct must be informed by that memory; he must honor and cherish it forever.

Different languages encode various shades of meaning about the activity of remembering. French, with its different verbs for diverse kinds of knowing (*savoir* and *connaître*) commonly employs *reconnaître*, literally meaning "to re-know." In English, the literal explanation of "re-member" is "to make whole again," to restore something that once was intact but no longer is. The Hebrew verb, *zakhor*, invites comparison to the noun for "masculine," *zakhar*.

"Forgetting," on the other hand, evokes darker and painful associations. Certainly we drop out of retrievable mind what we deem unimportant. The mass of trivial data accumulated on a daily basis would overwhelm anyone of us were we doomed to keep it in active awareness. But we also block out of consciousness that which is too painful or difficult such as traumatic experience or painful knowledge. We forget what we do not want to know. There is also an aggressive component to forgetfulness. Forgetfulness lures us into oblivion; we forget promises and responsibilities and, thereby, damage relationships with others. We have the capacity to annihilate through forgetfulness. Memory can be destroyed when a generation in possession of the past rejects it or fails to transmit it forward.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, we self-destruct and suffer humiliation by forgetting our own values and losing our identity.

Perhaps another experiment would be helpful. Think of the famous ending of Margaret Mitchell's classic, *Gone with the Wind*. Scarlett O'Hara, finally realizes that the love of her life is none other than her own husband, Rhett Butler. She runs to tell him, only to be met with his immortal words, "My dear, I don't give a damn."<sup>2</sup> These words sting and send readers scurrying into discussion about the unhappy couple's long-term fate. Now, imagine a sequel in which, some years later, Rhett Butler is asked about the heroine and responds "Scarlett? I don't remember her." Such a stunning act of repression would devastate Scarlett O'Hara and consign an epic character to the dustbin of literature.

<sup>1</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 109.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (New York: Scribner, 1964), 1035.

Torah incorporates themes of memory and forgetfulness throughout. In only three texts, however, are the verbs for “remembering” and “forgetting” used together.

### 1. GENESIS 40:23

ולא זכר שר המשקים את יוסף וישכחהו:

*But the chief butler did not remember Joseph—he forgot him.*

This succinct verse sums up the butler. This man of no memory erases personal history and in doing so denies his connections to past and future except for utilitarian purpose or accident. The brothers are also guilty of attempted identity murder by sentencing Joseph to the oblivion of the pit. In contrast to the butler, however, they never forget Joseph and, in their poignant meeting years later, identify themselves immediately in relation to their lost brother. The butler is the essence of Egypt, a country where a later Pharaoh will entirely forget how Joseph saved the entire nation. The butler epitomizes a culture where people are reduced to function, to their need fulfilling value as dispensable objects.

### 2. DEUTERONOMY 25:17-19

זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים:

אשר קרך בדרך ויזנב בך כל הנחשלים אחריך ואתה עיף וידע ולא ירא אלהים:  
והיה בהניח יקוק אלהיך לך מכל איביך מסיביב בארץ אשר יקוק אלהיך  
נתן לך נחלה לרשתה תמחה את זכר עמלק מתחת השמים לא תשכח:

*Remember what the Amalekites did to you on your way from Egypt, how they met you along the way and cut off all your stragglers in the rear of the march when you were exhausted and tired; they were unafraid of God. So when the Lord your God gives you relief from all the enemies who surround you in the land he is giving you as an inheritance, you must wipe out the memory of the Amalekites from under heaven—do not forget!*

In the Exodus 17:8-16 account of Amalek attacking the weak and defenseless children of Israel in the wilderness, God commands Moses to write down and to remember that historic incident. God also promises that God will wipe out memory of the people of Amalek. Deuteronomy 25:17-19 transfers this legacy of commemoration and revenge to the nation of Israel. Amalek represents evil, the absence of God. As a developing nation, *Benei Yisrael*, the children of Israel, are commanded to assume the dangerous responsibility of a hate-filled memory. We must retain sharp communal memory of Amalek’s nature and actions so that we stay vigilant towards their appearance in future history. We must carefully discriminate between different kinds of evil and recognize Amalekite versus non-Amalekite cruelty and badness. Through our own preservation of memory, we will annihilate Amalek by eradicating them from the collective mind of humanity.

### 3. DEUTERONOMY 9:7

זכר אל תשכח את אשר הקצפת את יקוק אלהיך במדבר למן היום אשר יצאת מארץ מצרים עד באכם עד המקום הזה ממרים הייתם עם יקוק;

*Remember—do not forget—how you provoked the Lord your God in the desert; from the time you left the land of Egypt until you came to this place you were constantly rebelling against him.*

The spare opening of this verse contracts the commandment to adjacent imperatives, “remember, do not forget.” Moses is close to the end of his journey; the children of Israel will soon enter the land without him. He implores them to retain a true and honest account of their behavior in the wilderness. The people must never distort history to think that God took them out of Egypt because of their superiority or their goodness. On the contrary, *Benei Yisrael* complain, revolt, and disobey throughout their exodus from slavery. In an ironic reference to memory, Moses has to plead with God to remember God’s own covenant with the patriarchs in order to evoke divine mercy on the sinful people of Israel.

In Torah, the dyad of memory and forgetfulness appears three times, organized around the exodus from Egypt. The story of the man who does not remember and forgets *Yosef* occurs early on the trajectory of the *Ya’akov’s* children coming into Egypt. The butler’s deficient historical, moral consciousness foreshadows the coming years of oppression and suffering. Amalek attacks the children of Israel as they journey out of Egypt. Torah repeatedly commands us not to forget the experience of slavery and to transform that memory into compassion to those in need. Deuteronomy 24:19 starkly commands us that we have an obligation to remember cruelty and to be on guard lest the perpetrators of evil ascend to power. Finally, as *Benei Yisrael* prepare to enter the land of Israel, Moses reviews the reality of their fractious relationship with God. The people should never think that God brought them out of Egypt to the land in recognition of their virtue. Rather, the opposite is true—time and time again, Moses reels an infuriated God back from destroying the whiny, rebellious and sinful wanderers. As he prepares to leave his flock of wanderers, Moses implores *Benei Yisrael* to remember forever the centrality and responsibility of the covenant. Only by not allowing ourselves to succumb to the siren song of forgetfulness, can we maintain our proper relationship to God and to our sacred heritage as a moral, responsible people with past, present and future purpose.