

SERMON BEFORE YIZKOR 5780

My friends, I have a confession to make. My memory just isn't what it used to be. I forget people's names all the time, even people I've known for years. I forget the names of books I've read and movies I've seen. I forget where I've left my keys. Well, that's nothing new. I've always misplaced my keys. But more and more, I find myself wishing my memory were better.

Especially at this time of year. This is, after all, the season of remembering. Rosh Hashanah is known as *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance, and remembering is one of its major themes:

"[God] You remember all that is forgotten..." we read in the *mahzor*.

"You remember all that has transpired since the beginning of time...For You, God, there is no forgetfulness; from You nothing is concealed. You remember all deeds...for You there is no forgetfulness."

For *God*, maybe. But for us? For us, it's more of a challenge. Memory, it turns out, is a tricky thing. Ever reminisce with a family member about a long-ago event? Your conversation might go something like this:

"Hey, remember that time when we were kids and we went to the Catskill Game Farm?"

"Yeah, that was fun. We stayed at a cool campground."

"We didn't go camping. We stayed at a motel."

"No, we didn't. Anyway, it was raining the whole time, I remember that!"

“What do you mean? We had great weather!

Two people. Recalling the same events. Both certain we are correct about the details. And both probably both wrong about some of the facts (unless it’s me.) Why does this happen?

According to research done by Daniela Schiller, of Mt. Sinai School of Medicine and her former colleagues from New York University, “our memories change each time they are recalled.” Memories, she explains, “are malleable constructs that are *reconstructed* with each recall.” [Arthur Dobrin, “*Your Memory Isn’t What You Think It Is*,” *Psychology Today*, 7/16/13]

Each time we recall and retell a story, we attach emotional details to it, and these altered feelings further reshape it. Schiller says, “My conclusion is that memory is what you are now. Not in pictures, not in recordings. Your memory is *who you are now*.”

On the *Yamim Noraim* – on these Days of Awe – we readily admit to the gaps in our memories. Long before brain science demonstrated the malleability of memories, the Sages of old knew how adept people are at forgetting. Forgetting our mistakes and our failures, overlooking our faults and failing to remember our responsibilities. For human beings, forgetfulness is our default setting.

And this long period of introspection – beginning with the month of Elul, leading to Rosh Hashanah, moving through the 10 Days of *Teshuvah* and culminating with today, Yom Kippur – these 40 days are meant to awaken us, to make us *remember*, so that we might repent and return. *Teshuvah* literally means return, but we can’t do that without first *remembering*.

This is not a matter of remembering names or movie titles or where we left our keys.

This is a different *kind* of remembering. It's about remembering the choices we've made, including the poor ones. The mistakes we've made. The missteps. The regrets. But *also* about recalling the good we've done. It's about remembering who we once were. Who we wanted to be. Remembering the dreams we had for ourselves. For our loved ones. For our world. It's about remembering where we came from. And where we want to go.

And yet. There is actually such a thing as remembering too much.

Jill Price knows “very well how tyrannical the memory can be.” Hers was the first diagnosed case of *hyperthymestic syndrome* — a memory condition in which a person is *incapable* of forgetting any detail of anything that ever happened to them. She wrote in her autobiography:

...I never know what I might remember next, and my recall is so vivid and true to life that it's as though I'm actually reliving the days, for good and for bad...As I grew up and more and more memories were stored in my brain, more and more of them flashed through my mind in this endless barrage, and I became a prisoner to my memory.

...learning how to manage a life in the present with so much of the past continually replaying itself in my mind has been quite a challenge, often a debilitating one. I have struggled through many difficult episodes of being emotionally overwhelmed by my memory through the course of my life.

(The Woman Who Can't Forget by Jill Price with Bart Davis. New York: Free Press, Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2008)

Although *hyperthymesia* is an extremely rare condition, I imagine that almost everyone in this room has had the experience of remembering “too much” at times. When we have undergone a painful experience, like the illness or death of a loved one, the details of that experience play through our minds over and over. Even years later, those terrible memories might be triggered suddenly. And then, how we wish we could forget! Time does help with this, but that’s not always enough. Those flashbacks are deeply distressing and if they don’t abate, it’s worth getting help.

Soldiers and others who have experienced severe trauma may need to seek special kinds of therapy. In these cases, forgetting, or at least not having to constantly re-experience the pain and trauma, is a blessing.

When else is it better *not* to remember everything? A parent or teacher or leader of any sort who holds onto and nurses every slight, or snub would soon become embittered and unable to function. Can you imagine a marriage or friendship enduring “if each partner remembered everything?” No relationship would survive!

Instead, my friend and colleague, Rabbi Brad Artson, recommends “cultivat[ing] the art of holy forgetfulness, forgetting [about] the missed opportunity, the offhand remark, the inappropriate comment or gift, and *just letting it go.*”

He quotes a midrash from the collection *Tanna De-Vei Eliyahu*, which begins by citing a statement in *Mishnah Avot*:

“*Ayzehu asheer* - Who is truly wealthy? One who is content with their portion”
(Mishnah Avot 4:1).

The sages of *Tanna De-Vei Eliyahu* ask: Who would be the richest of all? They supply the answer to their own question: God.

But here's the catch. If God remembers everything then what God would remember is our abundant shortcomings, our bickering, and our disappointments, our pettiness, and our violence.

How is it possible for God to be content while burdened with all of these negative involuntary memories all the time?

Brilliantly, the Midrash points out that God [chooses] *not* to remember everything! One of God's greatest traits is the ability to determine what is worth recall, and what is worth forgetting.

In the words of the Midrash, because "*God deliberately remembers the good, and deliberately forgets the bad, for that reason, God is content with God's lot.*"

God deliberately remembers the good, and deliberately forgets the bad.

The lesson of the Midrash is clear. What God is modeling for us is mindful forgetting. Mindful forgetting. Lest you think that's some kind of new-Agey formulation or just a contradiction in terms, allow me to reassure you. Mindful forgetting goes all the way back to the Torah. Turns out that "*Forgetting*" is actually a *mitzvah*!

In Deuteronomy 24:19, we read:

When you reap the harvest in your field *v'shchachta* - **and overlook/forget** a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it shall go to the stranger, the orphan, and the widow—in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings.

The Sages point out that this is the only mitzvah a person can't *plan* to do. After all, how can you deliberately forget or overlook a sheaf of grain when you are harvesting your field? Well, it's true that you can't exactly *plan* to forget...

But I do think that if a farmer cultivates (no pun intended) a certain attitude *in advance* of the harvest, it might raise his or her chances of fulfilling this mitzvah. And that is an attitude of not being overly scrupulous, of *being willing to let some things go*.

The farmer who is worried about getting every little bit of the harvest that they deserve will probably not overlook much when gathering up sheaves, and may not *ever* have the chance to perform the mitzvah of *shichichah*/forgetting. But the farmer who knows how fortunate they are to have land, how blessed they are to have a harvest each season, will not worry if a few sheaves are overlooked or dropped along the way. Those belong to the poor, to the landless, after all. And the land, in the end, belongs to God. Better, much better, *to let it go*.

I know we're not ancient Israelite farmers. But we, too, can suffer from being too scrupulous about remembering, certainly with others and even with ourselves. This whole day, we confess to a long litany of sins, and since these are couched in the plural (*Ashamnu*, *We* have transgressed; *Al het shehatanu*, for the sins *we* have committed...), the lists remind us not only of where we have fallen short as *individuals*, but as a *community* as well. To some degree, we are held responsible for each other's sins and shortcomings. The effect can be overwhelming.

But we need to remind ourselves of another reason our confession is communal. It's because, standing here, shoulder to shoulder, we can help lift one another up in the difficult work of *teshuvah*, of repentance and renewal. It is personal,

inner work, and yet we don't have to do it alone. We gather here on this awesome day to support each other in this journey.

The journey of remembering. *And* of mindfully, deliberately, forgetting and letting go. The rabbis of the Talmud teach, in Tractate Yoma, that if a person has confessed and repented for a sin on one Yom Kippur and has not repeated that sin, he or she should not *re-atone* for it on the following Yom Kippur. Such a person, they say, who keeps calling to mind sins of the past is “a fool who repeats his folly (Proverbs 26:11).” (See Yoma 86b)

In other words, say the Sages, let it go. *Forget it and move forward.*

The 11th-century Jewish philosopher Bachya ibn Pakuda, in his ethical masterpiece, *Duties of the Heart*, echoes this sentiment. He prescribes forgetting as an essential element of a healthy, wise, and happy life. He writes:

Were it not for the ability to forget, human beings would never be free from melancholy. No joyous occasion would dispel their sadness. The events that should delight them would afford them no pleasure, when they recalled the troubles of life. Even from the realization of their hopes they could not hope to derive rest and peace of mind. They would never refrain from grieving. Thus you see how memory and forgetfulness, different and contrary to each other as they are, are both endowments bestowed upon humans, and each of them has its uses.

(R. Bachya ibn Pakudah, *Chovot HaLevavot*, Gate Two, *Sha'ar HaBechinah*, "Gate of Examination," Chapter 5, quoted in *Shikh'chah: Forgetting, Mindfully, Parashat Nitzavim*, Rabbi Marc J. Margolius, Institute for Jewish Spirituality, 2019)

Rabbenu Bahya was right. Memory and forgetfulness are gifts, and each has its uses. My teacher, Rabbi Marc Margolius, wonders:

How can we forgive ourselves for the wrongs we have committed, and/or the wrongs which others have done to us? By remembering them only in order to "forget" them, to release them to the past.

In mindfulness practice, as in Jewish tradition, we are encouraged to see each moment as it arises as utterly new and brimming with unlimited possibility;

God renews the work of Creation on an ongoing basis, so that no moment is like any which has preceded it. As an aspect of Creation, in each and every moment we have the potential to be and to act in an utterly new way, free from and unconditioned by our previous behavioral patterns. We might think of the practice of noticing the past and not being bound by it as "*mindful forgetting*."

(*Shikh'chah: Forgetting, Mindfully, Parashat Nitzavim*, Rabbi Marc J. Margolius, Institute for Jewish Spirituality, 2019)

I love this notion of "mindful forgetting." What might such "mindfulness" look like and how might it help us do the work of *teshuvah*? Rabbi Margolius suggests that we observe whether a memory of the past triggers powerful thoughts or sensations in the present.

We can [then] notice whether we experience such thoughts and sensations as pleasant ([with] a glow of pleasure), causing us to turn towards them; as unpleasant ([with] a pang of pain, guilt or shame), causing us to turn away; or as neutral. We can thereby observe the extent of the current power of the memories-whether they "have a hold on us," or they have no power over us.

He advises that:

“We might then set an intention to hold the memory and enable it to serve its purpose of prodding us to grow, or to ‘mindfully forget’ and release the power in a memory which functions only as stumbling block.”

Rabbi Margolius suggests that, by doing this, “we can grow in wisdom in our relationship with the past.”

A thousand years ago, Rabbenu Bahya taught how important it is to remember... *and* to forget.

At this time of year - so fraught with contemplating past and future, so resonant with memories - may we be blessed with a measure of holy forgetfulness.

In our relationships with others, may we be blessed to discern when it is wiser to drop it, as we would a forgotten sheaf in the field.

In examining our own behavior, may we be blessed to recognize whether recalling our failures is helping us move forward, or holding us captive.

We pray that our most painful memories of suffering and loss – which are part of being human - become softened over time and gradually forgotten.

May we be blessed to be able to remember the beautiful times with our cherished loved ones, the gifts of their lives.

May we strive to be *mindful* about our remembering and our forgetting in the coming year.

And may our holy forgetting and our remembering be for a blessing. *Amen.*

