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שמע בקולה

Yizkor: Yom Kippur  
and Remembrance

By Deborah E. Lipstadt

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# Yizkor: Yom Kippur and Remembrance

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On Shabbat *Ha'azinu*, three days after Yom Kippur, we will read: “*Zekhor yemot olam, beenu shnot dor va’dor*”—“Remember the days of yore, learn the lessons of the generations that have come before you” (Deut. 32:7).

If there is a commanding verb for Jews, it is *zekhor*—remember. Jewish tradition is infused with the imperative to remember. *Zekhor al tishkah*—Remember, do not forget. But what is the function of memory? For Jews, the past is the anchor for the present. It is the stuff from which the future is shaped. Memory constitutes more than the raw material from which nostalgia is wrought, though—it is also a guide and a teacher.

Memory is, of course, a form of history, and it is history that we invoke when we remember. The Jewish God is clearly a God who participates in history. In the Amidah, for example, the first description of God is “*Elohei Avoteinu*”—“God of our ancestors.” When Moshe returns to Egypt to announce to the Israelites that he is about to free them, he says that he comes not in the name of the God who created Heaven and Earth, but in the name of “God of the ancestors,” the God of history (Exodus 3:16).

The injunction to remember is, in the words of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, a “religious imperative to an entire people.” At Sinai, God says that the Covenant is being made not only with those who were there, but “those not here on this day”—with generations yet to come (Deuteronomy 29:13-14). Even Yehoshua recognizes the seeming outrageousness of this claim. He knows that there

will be a time when future generations will ask, “What is this? What does it mean? From where does it come?” If they had all been at Sinai, there would have been no need for them to ask. Therefore, as the Israelites cross the river Jordan to enter Canaan, Yehoshua instructs the leaders of the tribes: Take stones from the river. They are to serve as a reminder, a sign, a memory, so that when the day comes and your children ask, “What are these stones you have?” you will tell them that you took them from the Jordan when the Ark of the Covenant crossed through.

By your telling, your remembering, the next generation will be bound up in the event as if they had indeed been there. Your telling the story makes them part of it. It is not the stones that are decisive, but the memory transmitted by them. We cannot go back to Sinai; therefore, to quote Yerushalmi, “what took place at Sinai must be borne along the conduits of memory to those who were not there that day.”

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In the middle of the Yom Kippur service we say Yizkor, a prayer whose name proclaims, “Remember.” There are many parts of the *Yamim Noraim* that take the theme of remembering. At no point during these ten days, though, does the act of remembering take on a more personal form.

What is Yizkor? In its original and traditional form it is a simple and unostentatious prayer with no flowery prose, a prayer that was originally said only on Yom Kippur. But why—why do we say Yizkor on Yom Kippur?

According to Rabbi Moshe Isserles, even the souls of the departed are forgiven on Yom Ha-Kippurim. The plural *Kippurim* implies, according to some commentators, a dual atonement—for the living and for the dead. This is illustrated in Deuteronomy, which contains a prayer to be said by the leaders of a town in which a body of a corpse has been found. “*Kaper l’amkha Yisrael asher padita*”—“Forgive Your people Israel, whom You have redeemed” (21:8). The Sifre says,

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*l'amkha*—the living, *asher padita*—those you have redeemed, the dead. In the Tanakh, we see prayers for the souls of the dead, even as David prayed for Absalom. The Levush, however, believes that the purpose of Yizkor is not to win atonement for the dead, but to recall the merits of the previous generations and to ask that their good deeds work on our behalf.

As you may have observed, all these explanations fall into two categories: We, the living, redeem those who have died—or those who have died redeem us by virtue of their good deeds.

I suggest that these explanations ignore an important ontological aspect of Yizkor. This ontological aspect of Yizkor is also central to the act of *teshuvah*. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, in an essay on repentance in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, talks about the need to look back. Only then do we see the distance already covered, the progress made. Repentance, he observes, does not bring a sense of serenity, of completion, but “stimulates a reaching out in further effort.”

Steinsaltz posits that Jewish tradition believes that someone who has stopped going, who has a feeling of completion and of peace, is someone who has lost his or her way. I suggest that memory does the same thing—it keeps us from feeling completed and at peace—and that is why the Yizkor service became such an important element of Yom Kippur.

Repentance and memory can stimulate that going, that desire to move ahead, to keep changing. And it is here that the third purpose served by Yizkor comes into play. When we remember, irrespective of whom we are remembering—a parent, a grandparent, a sibling, an aunt or uncle, teacher or mentor—these memories become part of us. As we internalize these memories they change us and we evolve, we grow. So, too, those who will follow us and remember us may be changed by their memories of us.

Memory is not just a link from generation to another. It also has its lateral aspects. Every human action, as Yerushalmi notes, “elicits certain

inevitable results.” If I remember something and am changed by it, that change may, in turn, elicit a reaction from those around me. In other words, the impact of remembering travels down from generation to generation but also cuts across all generations. It happens now.

Even though scientists have unlocked our genetic makeup, they have not been—and probably never will be—able to tell us about the transmission of the soul, of our very being. It remains a mystery; but one of the ways in which it is passed on is through memory. Each of us takes our perception of the past and, as we incorporate it into our own experiences, it becomes part of who we are. Remembering becomes an ontological experience, something that changes the essence of our being.

When we return the Torah to the ark, we proclaim: “*hadesh yameinu k'kedem*.” Renew our days so that they will be returned to the days of yore. Are we really asking to be returned to the past? That may be the literal translation, but there is another meaning implicit in that sentence: Renew our days, infuse what we are with the best of “*yemei kedem*.” Make us new by helping us remember the past and fusing it with the present.

We do the same thing during Yizkor. It is not an exercise in nostalgia, but a way of changing our very selves, as well as those around us and those who will follow us. The act of remembering changes us and gives life to those who are no long here. The Almighty asks the prophet Yehezkel, “*Ha-tihyena ha-atzamat ha-eleh?*”—“Will these dry bones live again? Yehezkel responds: “*Ata yadata*”—only You, God, know. Yehezkel was right. So too, today, only God knows our ultimate fate. But there is a way we can make dry bones live again. By remembering those who came before us and incorporating the example of their lives into our lives, we can give them life. In so doing we inscribe them in *sefer ha-hayim*—not the Book of Life, but the Book of the Living. They become part of an *etz hayim*—not just a tree of life but a living tree, one that is replenished by the past and nurtures the future.

May the memories of those who have preceded us make us new and better people.

May we use the time and opportunity given us to live lives that are replete with acts of goodness and kindness.

And when we have fulfilled the measure of our days, when we have become but a memory, may we have lived the kind of lives that make us worthy not just of being remembered, but also of being inscribed in the book of those who live on after us, the book of the living.

*Zakhrenu l'hayim melekh hafetz ba-hayim v'katvenu b'sefer ha-hayim.*

זכרינו לחיים מלך חפץ בחיים  
וכתבינו בספר החיים.

*V'khen yehi ratzon.*

וכן יהי רצון.

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