

**Shanah Tovah, G'mar Tov, may we all be signed and sealed for a peaceful, happy, and healthy new year. And I think I speak for everyone that if I'm only allowed to choose one of those, I'll take health. Peaceful and happy I can figure out on my own. Health comes from God.**

**A congregant asked me an unexpected question the other day. The question was, "May I get a haircut between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?" The answer, by the way, is yes, you may. We don't get haircuts during intermediate days of Sukkot and Passover, but the Ten Days of Repentance have different rules.**

**I say that this was an unexpected question because during this time of year, I get one question over and over again. "Rabbi, when's Yizkor?" Every time I hear that question, I'm so tempted to say, "Services start at 8:45 in the morning," but I always bite my tongue because that's just petty and mean.**

**And then I started thinking about that question, "What time is Yizkor?" and I figured out an even better answer. The real answer to the question "When is Yizkor" is that Yizkor never ends. It's all the time, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.**

**Why do I say that? I say that because the word Yizkor comes from Hebrew root that means memory, and for us Jews, our collective memory is always on. For us, our collective Jewish memory is the most important thing in the universe.**

**First, I'm going to tell you the difference between memory and history. Then, I'll tell you how memory makes Jewish life meaningful. Third, I'll tell you how Jews are supposed to perceive time. Finally, I'll connect all of this to our Yizkor prayers today.**

**Let's start with the difference between memory and history. Jewish history is an interesting academic discipline, but history does not keep a people alive from generation to generation. History is a list of events and dates.**

**Memory, in contrast, records the thoughts, emotions, joys and tragedies of about a hundred million Jewish souls from Abraham to the babies born this morning.**

**History can tell you that my grandfather left Russia after the Kishnev pogrom of 1903. But only collective memory can tell me what he and his family were feeling at the time, the terror they experienced when Russian Orthodox priests led a crowd of rabid terrorists to murder 47 Jews and severely injure many more.**

**History can tell you that the State of Israel declared independence on May 14, 1948. But only collective memory can describe the ecstatic joy of achieving dominion on our ancestral land after 2,000 years of stateless wandering.**

**History can tell you that Jews have been eating matzah ball soup for probably a thousand years. Only collective memory can tell you that when you eat the soup your late mother served, you're bringing her back. While you eat the soup, she's sitting right there next to you, telling you to both not eat so fast and to have seconds.**

**History is powerful, but memory is even better. That's why the Jewish scholar Haim Yosef Yeroushalmi pointed out that Hebrew has no native word for history. When Israelis talk about history, they use the international cognate historia.**

**But historia is not a real Hebrew word and it's not a Jewish concept. Yeroushalmi says that the authentic Jewish word for history is zekher, memory, the same word that we hear in the word Yizkor.**

**Our collective Jewish memory is like a fancy resort. It's all-inclusive. It connects all Jews in all places in all eras, all passengers and all rows.**

**As Rabbi Aharon Wexler points out in a recent article, Jewish memory welcomes converts to Judaism. Because we value memory more than history, it does not**

**matter that a convert may have Irish roots or Italian roots or what have you. The moment that a sincere convert immerses, that new Jew joins us in our collective memory.**

**In our collective memory, there is no difference between someone who has had a Jewish family for thousands of years and someone who has been a Jew for ten minutes. The convert's genealogical history is unimportant. All that matters is the collective Jewish memory.**

**That is why the midrash says that all future converts were present at Mount Sinai when the Torah was revealed. By joining the collective memory, converts feel our Jewish identity just as anyone who was born Jewish, often more so.**

**Now let's look at how our collective Jewish memory makes Jewish life meaningful. We Jews have lots of ancient laws and customs. Why do we even try to keep them in the twenty-first century?**

**The reason we keep these ancient rituals is that they form the network we use for our collective memory. All those rituals and customs and stories and dances and songs are like the chips in computer, they contain the memory.**

**Everything we're told that we must do and everything we're told we must not do are part of this network, a network that has 613 nodes we call commandments. Each of those nodes branches off into dozens of customs and traditions.**

**Let's take the fast of Yom Kippur as an example. I don't like fasting. I've developed a coffee habit over the years, and it's rough not having it for 25 hours. At about five o'clock, my head is going to start pounding like a Marine Corps drum.**

**But I fast anyway, because when I fast, I'm connecting with scores of millions of Jews who have done the same thing over the centuries. I'm feeling the same**

**hunger and yearning that they did, and it is as if they are sharing my empty stomach and my headache. That's what makes it meaningful. It's not *my* fast, it's *our* fast.**

**The collective memory network is what gives me the strength to do mitzvot that are difficult. Sukkot, which starts this coming Wednesday, is a case in point. Building the sukkah, even from my relatively easy sukkah kit, is not all that easy, and I can think of a lot of things I'd rather do.**

**But then I take a look at ancient carvings or simply read the Torah itself, and I remind myself that I am not building my Sukkah. I'm building a small part of Israel's Sukkah, the one that fits all of us throughout time. That's why we traditionally invite the Ushpizin, the seven holy guests of our collective memory: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David, one each night.**

**My only complaint is that the seven guests always come empty-handed. They could at least bring a kugel or a babka, know what I mean?**

**Keeping laws and customs from previous generations is counter-cultural, it's practically revolutionary in today's climate. Americans are so concerned with the latest changes in society and technology that we sneer at the past with embarrassment.**

**I write iPhone apps as a hobby, and the rules are constantly changing. When programming rules change, and they're always changing, programmers say that they have been deprecated. If a technique is deprecated, that means you shouldn't use it any more in your apps because it will soon be rejected.**

**Jewish law is different. Our laws and customs are almost never deprecated. New ones occasionally develop, but the old ones remain valid. Why is that? The reason is that our collective memory network thrives on the old, not the new.**

**Now let's talk about how Jews are supposed to perceive time. We are supposed to perceive time differently than non-Jews typically do.**

**I'm not talking about Jewish Standard Time, which is fifteen or twenty minutes later than normal scheduled time, unless you're German-Jewish, in which case Jewish Standard Time is at least thirty minutes early.**

**No, I'm talking about how we perceive the past, present, and future. Jews are supposed to experience time as a unified stream, a stream in which past, present, and future exist simultaneously.**

**The non-Jewish way to perceive time is to experience the past, the present and the future as separate concepts.**

**And don't get me wrong, that makes sense for ordinary, boring, secular life. How are we supposed to keep schedules if we don't differentiate between past, present, and future?**

**But from the standpoint of Jewish spirituality, these ideas of past, present and future are artificial and man-made. They are convenient illusions, but they're not real. We Jews are supposed to perceive the unity of time.**

**Past, present, and future are supposed to be all the same thing for us. Time is all that exists. We Jews don't live everywhere, but we do live everywhen.**

**Everything that will happen has already happened. Everything that happened in the past is happening right now this very second. As Kohelet teaches us, there is nothing new under the sun, ain hadash tahat hashamesh.**

**This is an important concept for understanding what it means to be Jewish. Recall that the Haggadah says that we are obligated to view ourselves as though we personally left Egypt on that night.**

**If you think in secular, non-Jewish terms of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, then this idea makes no sense. How can we claim to have experienced personally something that happened three thousand years ago?**

**The concept only makes sense if we perceive time from the Jewish perspective, only if we unite time into one vast ocean of existence, a sea in which the past, the present, and the future swim together simultaneously.**

**We are supposed perceive time in the same way that God perceives time. God's name in Hebrew, Yud-hay-vav-hay, the word we pronounce Adonai, is traditionally understood as a combination of all time. Haya, hoveh, yihiyeh - God was, God is, and God always will be.**

**Repentance itself, seeking forgiveness, is itself an act of unifying time. Why, after all, does it matter that we hurt someone in the past? Why can't we just forget about it and let bygones be bygones without all the messiness of apologies?**

**The reason is that our sins cause others to get stuck on a past hurt. By sincerely apologizing for the sin, we are throwing the person we hurt a life preserver so that we can pull them back into the present. In so doing, we preserve the relationship for the future.**

**Repentance, teshuvah, means return. Return to what? Well, sure, it means returning to God, but what does that mean? I think we return to God by returning to the Jewish perception of time. In Jewish time, the mitzvot are always relevant. In Jewish time, the prayers are always meaningful.**

**Am I just spouting off a bunch of spiritual mumbo-jumbo? Absolutely not. If you're having trouble with what I'm saying, just look at the stars tonight. Take a look at Polaris, the North Star, since it's easy to find. It's the tip of the Little Dipper's handle**

**When you look at Polaris, the light that strikes your eyes is over four hundred years old. You are looking at the distant past even though you are situated here in New Jersey in what you call the present. We are surrounded by the unity of time that we call the universe.**

**Consider Jonah, the man at the center of the story that we'll read later this afternoon during the Minha haftarah reading. In case you're rusty on your Bible, Jonah was the man who ran away from God, got thrown into the waters, and was swallowed by a large fish.**

**When Jonah boarded the ship to Tarshish, God sent a storm. The other passengers on the ship cast lots and determined that the storm was Jonah's fault, and they asked him where he came from and his national origin.**

**Jonah's answer is telling. He said, "I am a Hebrew" - Ivri Anokhi. What is an Ivri, a Hebrew? Rabbi David Altschuler, who lived in eighteenth century Poland, noted that Ivri has the word Avar in it. Avar in Hebrew means the past but Rabbi Altschuler says it also means across, as in across the river.**

**That, he says, is who the Jews, the Hebrews are. We are the people from the other side of the river. In every generation, we live on the other side of the river, across from all other peoples. We are a people that stands apart, a people that perceives the river of time differently from everyone else.**

**So now that I've told you that memory is more important than history and that Jews are supposed to perceive time as a unified stream, what does any of this have to do with Yizkor today?**

**Memory and the unity of time are relevant to Yizkor because that is what we do at Yizkor. When we recall our departed loved ones, it's not their history that we're remembering. We don't think about dates of birth or place of birth or any ordinary biographical information that you would put on a family tree. That's not what Yizkor is for.**

**The point of Yizkor is to recall our memories, not history. What kinds of things did our loved ones say? What was their smile like? What did they cook, what did they teach us? What did it feel like to be squeezed by them or kissed? Those are memories.**

**Furthermore, Yizkor is an exercise that reminds us how to unify the rivers of time, how to join the past, present and future. On this day, the souls of the dead are sitting right here next to us. We see them, we hear them, we feel them. We look at our children and grandchildren, our future, and for a few minutes, we remember that time is unified from one generation to the next.**

**I'm sure that you feel the absence in the room that I do. We are all experiencing the profound absence of Al Nacson, our late and beloved High Holy Day Hazzan. He sang from this bimah for at least thirty years, maybe more. Our memory of him is something that brings all of us together.**

**Today, I want you to consider that Al Nacson is still here. Though we are blessed to have Daniel Greenfield on the bimah, and I mean that, (he's cheering you on!) please remember that Al is still here. His voice is silent on the bimah, but I still hear it in my head, and I think many of you do, as well.**



**His memory provides inspiration, and inspiration is what fuels the future. Thus by remembering AI, we unify the stream of time for Temple Beth El - past, present, and future all occur simultaneously.**

**So it is for all of our loved ones. We will start Yizkor momentarily. Concentrate on the memory of your late family members and friends with the same intensity that we use to hear the Shofar. Call their memory into the present, and then derive inspiration for the future.**

**May the merit of our loved ones help us in our prayer that we be sealed for a Shanah Tovah.**