

Parashat Bemidbar

A Hasidic legend tells us that the great Rabbi Baal-Shem-Tov, Master of the Good Name, also known as the Besht, undertook an urgent and perilous mission: to hasten the coming of the Messiah. The Jewish people, all humanity were suffering too much, beset by too many evils. They had to be saved, and swiftly. For having tried to meddle with history, the Besht was punished; banished along with his faithful servant to a distant island. In despair, the servant implored his master to exercise his mysterious powers in order to bring them both home. "Impossible", the Besht replied. "My powers have been taken from me". "Then, please, say a prayer, recite a litany, work a miracle". "Impossible", the Master replied, "I have forgotten everything". They both fell to weeping. Suddenly the Master turned to his servant and asked: "Remind me of a prayer - any prayer." "If only I could", said the servant. "I too have forgotten everything". "Everything - absolutely everything?" "Yes, except - "Except what?" "Except the alphabet". At that the Besht cried out joyfully: "Then what are you waiting for? Begin reciting the alphabet and I shall repeat after you...". And together the two exiled men began to recite, at first in whispers, then more loudly: "Aleph, beth, gimel, daleth...". And over again, each time more vigorously, more fervently; until, ultimately, the Besht regained his powers, having regained his memory.

This wonderful story beautifully illustrates the profound truth that our identities are inextricably bound up with our memories. Here we have the Besht, the worker of miracles, one so allegedly great that he could hasten the coming of the Messiah, but with his memory removed he felt reduced to nothingness. And that is because deep down in our subconscious each of us is constantly interacting with the memory of our past, with memories of good and bad times, happy times and sad, especially with our seminal experiences of childhood. Indeed, it is as a result of this interaction with memory that, for better or for worse, we are what we are in the present. The best memories are undoubtedly those of happy times; the good memories which buoy up our mood in the present and inspire us to aim toward living full lives in the future. Memories, perhaps, of the birth of your children funny things they said and did while growing up; memories of a wedding or times with friends. Or perhaps, speaking personally, a memory of a dramatic Timm Klose last second equaliser against your bitter rivals Ipswich! Boy was that a day! It still brings a smile to my face! The most difficult memories to handle are naturally those that relate to a traumatic experience; being bullied or abused, or perhaps the loss of a loved one. We usually don't mind memories of the good times popping into our consciousness do we, but traumatic memories are far more difficult to deal with? Learning how to handle them and keeping them from poisoning your present day life is in many ways the art of learning how to master our lives. Show me a person who has learned the art of managing the feelings that their memories inevitably induce and I will show you someone who is best equipped to live life to the fullest extent in the here and now. The skill of handling memory isn't in constantly trying to push the bad memories away, to exorcise them from our minds, as if they are imposters, but in simply coming to terms with them since memories are a part of us. Go to war against your memories and you effectively declare war against yourself. And in a war against yourself there can only be one loser!

Parashat Bemidbar

Dealing with traumatic memories is difficult, but how much more traumatic is it to have no memory at all? What might that do to your sense of self? This is perhaps why dementia is such a destructive and feared condition because it is not only destructive to the body, in attack the mind it destroys a person's sense of self. After all, how can you be yourself when you have no memory of yourself? And what is your quality of life when you can no longer recognise loved ones? Indeed, what goes for individuals when it comes to memory also goes for communities, people groups and nations. We should certainly pity the people or nation that has had a traumatic history, but we can be reconciled with traumatic memories. Perhaps the community, people or nation that has no memory is to be pitied even more - for without a reconciled memory there is no present and without a present there is no future. Certainly our Jewish people have had a traumatic past, but better to be a people that remembers even all of this trauma, than one that forgets. In fact, perhaps it is the very fact that Jews have such a well developed memory that has kept us alive until this present moment? Jews have a culture of memory that has bound generation to generation. We pride ourselves in knowing where we have come from and we afford the utmost respect to those that came before us. The practice of remaining seated during kaddish, and that of Yizkor, where candles are lit three times a year in memory of deceased relatives, palpably attest to this culture of memory and respect. The practice of assigning a Hebrew name to a child at birth that memorialises ones parents again pays homage to the culture of memory and respect for forbears. In the Hebrew language, moreover, we do not simply ask someone how old they are, but we ask them 'ben kama atah' (in the case of a man) or 'bat kama at' (in the case of a woman) – literally, how long have you been a son or how long have you been a daughter? Moreover, nowhere is this culture of memory as fully developed as in the world of the sages, who do not speak in their own name but in the name of a long list of teachers. So it is that in the Talmud, as one example out of many thousands that we might cite, we read that "Rabbi Zera said in the name of rabbi Abbahu, who quoted rabbi Johanan". Indeed, right from the very beginning of our existence as a nation we have paid attention to the memory of our ancestors. In Parashat B'midbar this week, for example, we read that each individual had to stand before Moshe and recite his genealogy according to tribe, clan and family. That every Israelite was able, without prior preparation, without years of intensive internet study, to reel off his genealogy tells us that not only was great pride taken in familial, tribal, clan and national background, but that each Israelite had a firm grasp of his place in the greater scheme of things -and it is this culture of memory that supports our identity in the present. Indeed, in spite of exile, slavery, assimilation, migration and persecution, we have never lost our memory and therefore our identity, and I believe that this has been key to helping us to survive in the present.

In fact the imperative to remember is repeatedly expressed throughout the various books that make up the compendium of Jewish thought that is otherwise known as the Bible. Thus, for instance, in Devarim 5:15 we read with regard to Shabbat: "You are to remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and ADONAI your God brought you out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore ADONAI your God has ordered you to keep

Parashat Bemidbar

the day of Shabbat." See how the memory of our slavery in Egypt is to provide a rationale for our present day observance of Shabbat! Indeed, the memory of the exodus from Egypt is, in particular, something that every generation of Jews has been commanded to make their own and which therefore is to inform our identity in the present. In Shemot 12:14 we are thus commanded to remember the Pesach: "This will be," it says, "a day for you to remember and celebrate as a festival to ADONAI; from generation to generation you are to celebrate it by a perpetual regulation." Our culture of memory takes hold of this injunction and develops it even further. Not content to merely 'remember' we read in our Haggadah that we cannot consider ourselves to have fulfilled the commandment until we can honestly say that we too, in this generation, though separated by millennia, also came out of Egypt. It is thus that the youngest child asks: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" To which the response is given, "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt and the Eternal God brought us out with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. And if the Most Holy, blessed be He, had not brought our ancestors out from Egypt, then even we, our children, and our children's children might still have been in bondage to the Pharaohs in Egypt..." Thus this child not only remembers but personalises the memory of the exodus. By way of contrast the wicked child refuses to connect in any way with the memory of the exodus. "What does this service mean to you?" he says. To which the Haggadah retorts, "Saying 'you' he purposefully excludes himself and has withdrawn from the community. You should say to him, 'Because of what the Eternal did for me when I came forth from Egypt' I do this. For me and not for him; for had he been there, he would not have been redeemed." We see how, in this exchange, it is memory and the personalisation of that memory that is said to save. The wicked child is lost in the present because of his refusal to remember the past while the wise child is saved in the present by doing precisely the opposite. As the Haggadah adds, "In every generation each one of us should regard himself as though he himself had gone forth from Egypt, as it is said (Shemot 13:8): 'And you shall show your son in that day, saying, 'This is done because of that which the Lord did to Me when I came forth out of Egypt.' Not our ancestors alone did G-d redeem then, but he did us redeem with them as it is said (Devarim 6:23): 'And He brought us out from there that he might bring us in to give us the land which he swore to our fathers.' Therefore we are duty bound to thank, to praise, to glorify, to exalt, to honour, to bless, to extol, and to give reverence to Him who performed for us, as well as our forefathers, all these wonders. He has brought us, as well as our forefathers, all these wonders. He has brought us forth from bondage to freedom, from sorrow to joy, mourning to festival, from darkness to bright light, and from slavery to redemption. Now, therefore, let us sing before Him a new song, Halleluyah." It is fascinating to see how by the end of this passage the Haggadah makes the exodus experience primarily that of the present generation that is keeping the feast today and only secondarily that of the generation to whom it historically occurred. It doesn't say that Hashem "performed for our forefathers, as well as for us, all these wonders" as if we, the present generation, are bit part players, but it reverses the roles and declares that "all these wonders" were "performed for us, as well as our forefathers" Such is the power of memory.

Parashat Bemidbar

The imperative not just to remember but to connect and personalise that memory is found with regard to other festivals too, not least with Shavuot. Interestingly, with regard to what we have just heard about Pesach, we read in Devarim 16:10-12 that the memory of the exodus is also to inspire us in our commemoration of Shavuot. Thus “You are to observe the festival of Shavu’ot (weeks) for ADONAI your God with a voluntary offering, which you are to give in accordance with the degree to which ADONAI your God has prospered you. You are to rejoice in the presence of ADONAI your God—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female slaves, the L’vi’im living in your towns, and the foreigners, orphans and widows living among you—in the place where ADONAI your God will choose to have his name live. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt; then you will keep and obey these laws.” Although most of the mitzvot relating to Shavuot refer to his as a harvest festival it is apparent from this passage that Shavuot isn’t just a time to celebrate the wheat harvest it is also a time to remember our passage from slavery to freedom. At Shavuot too therefore we not only remember that we were slaves in Egypt and that Hashem brought us out with an outstretched arm, we also remember the giving of the Torah. Indeed, this is surely why Moshe said, “Only beware and guard yourself carefully, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they stray from your heart all the days of your life. And you are to make them known to your children and to your children’s children – the day you stood before Hashem, your God, at Sinai” (Devarim 4:9-10)? Thus the giving of the Torah is to be remembered alongside the exodus. Therefore just as we remember and personalise our exodus from Egypt, so too we remember and personalise the giving of the Torah. It is in this way that these seminal events in our people’s history become relevant to our lives today. I am struck in this respect by a comment by Rabbi Shimon Finkelman in his preface to the Artscroll commentary on Shavuot. He says, “One year, when I took leave of my Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Shneur Kotler, before returning home for the Pesach intercession, he told me, ‘One has to feel the yom tov all year long.’ Since then, R’ Shneur’s comment filters through my mind each time Pesach, Shavuot or Succos approaches. Its intent, I think, is clear: In Judaism, a festival is not a commemoration of a given historic event. Rather, it is a time that pulsates with the spiritual light which was manifest when that event occurred. Each festival presents a unique opportunity for spiritual growth, and it is a Jew’s task to make the occasion a spiritual experience so telling that he will ‘feel it all year long’. Each year on Shavuot, the Jewish people relive the moment when God revealed His presence to His Chosen People, when every man, woman and child heard His voice as He declared, ‘I am Hashem, your God.’ That moment in our people’s history remains the cornerstone of our faith, and its anniversary each year is a time when every Jew can renew his attachment and dedication to God and His Torah.”

In Judaism no memory is just dead history; indeed the day that it becomes dead history for us then we will surely die spiritually too. On the contrary, we continue to recall the events of our past not merely for their own sake, but also for ours. For a people only has strength and identity in the present to the degree that it engages with its past. As it was with the Besht so it is with us. Loss of memory disempowers and emasculates a people. It is only as we

Parashat Bemidbar

remembering and interact with the meaning of that memory that we find strength and identity in the present. It therefore behoves us, as we celebrate the festival of Shavuot, not only to commemorate an important historical event in the history of our people, but it behoves us too to take that leap of faith as we do at Pesach and stand together with our ancestors at the foot of Mount Sinai. Let us with faith hear the rumble of thunder as the Torah is pronounced. Let us by faith stand with them as we all together declare, "All that the Lord has commanded we will do," knowing also that in Yeshua these mitzvot are no longer something 'out there,' i.e. something that is solely inscribed on stone tablets, but something that is 'in here,' i.e. inscribed on our hearts. For as we now know Yeshua is the very embodiment of our Torah and such he beckons us on into a profound relationship with them that, when properly understood and practiced, have the capacity to change and enrich our lives as well as the world.