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YAMIM NORA'IM \ ימים נוראים

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ROSH HASHANAH TEACHINGS

on

The Six Remembrances

by

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I Memory and the Exodus from Egypt (Rosh Hashanah Evening)

Vatiten lanu, Adonai Eloheinu b'ahavah et Yom HaZikaron hazeh...
"With love you have bestowed upon us this Day of Remembrance . . ."

Most of us think of Rosh Hashanah as the Jewish New Year. In our liturgy, though, it's primarily known as *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance. And here in the prayerbook we carefully translated it as "Day of Remembrance," not "Memorial Day." We have an Israeli memorial day in the spring (confusingly, also called *Yom HaZikaron*), in which we remember those who died serving the country. But here memory -- one of the central themes of the most intense, and awe-filled period of the year -- is not about remembering the dead, and not even really about remembering the past.

At a basic level, these days are about remembering how forgetful we human beings are. We forget who we are, and we forget our place in the world -- both our humility, and our nobility. We forget our mission. We forget our values. Sometimes we forget that we love someone.

We forget because we get angry, and frustrated. We forget because we're seduced or manipulated. We forget because we're distracted, and don't even realize how lost we are. As Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said, "Man is a messenger who forgot the message." Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are supposed to help us remember.

Our generations in particular have memory problems, and I'm not talking about the challenges that come with aging.¹ The way we relate to memory in general, and especially to Jewish memory, has changed in very fundamental -- and in some cases very troubling -- ways:

One of the great ironies of modern Jewish life is that we now know much more about our origins, our history, and our ancestry than we ever did before; and as a collective, we care about it considerably less. The key system by which Jews related to their past has changed to "history" -- in many ways the corollary or sometimes the antithesis of memory . . .²

Memory is not history. Memory is, by its very nature, fluid. Current research on the brain reveals that our memories are not like the hard drives on our computers, where we can pull up a document and then have the option of simply closing it again, unaltered. Scientists now believe that every time we evoke a memory, we change it. Our memories not only shape our current experience, but they are shaped by it, sometimes consciously, sometimes not.

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1. In preparation for the High Holy Days, I read a number of excellent books on memory, which have inspired and shaped my thinking. I am particularly indebted to Joshua Foer (*Moonwalking with Einstein -- The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*), Yehuda Kurtzer (*Shuva -- The Future of the Jewish Past*), Avishai Margalit (*The Ethics of Memory*), and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (*Zakhor - Jewish History and Jewish Memory*). I have tried to footnote all direct quotes, but I fear I am no longer able to identify the source of some of the ideas contained herein, as well as certain phrases that have likely originated with one of these exceptional authors, and can therefore only acknowledge with gratitude their great influence and assistance.
 2. Yehudah Kurtzer, *Shuva -- The Future of the Jewish Past* (Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2012) pp. 2-3.

We Jews have known this forever. Jewish memory makes no claim to consistency, completeness, or objectivity. It is brazenly and proudly subjective, selective, and ever evolving.

For us, memory is an active process of shaping the past to create a meaningful present and a more hopeful future. We *use* our pasts -- both the events we've personally experienced, and the past transmitted to us as a memory of memories. Memory is not so much what we *know*, as what we *believe* about the past, and even more -- what it means to us today.

History is right or wrong, true or false. Memory is alive or dead, contiguous or broken, meaningful or empty, helpful or destructive.

Moreover, unlike history which is linear, memory is cyclical, revealing mythic time. We remember not events but paradigms, which repeat and help us make sense of today, even if the surface facts seem completely new.

For the rabbis the Bible was not only a repository of past history, but a revealed pattern of the whole of history . . . [T]hey had learned from the Bible that the true pulse of history often beat beneath its manifest surfaces, an invisible history that was more real than what the world, deceived by the more strident outward rhythms of power, could recognize.³

Jewish studies departments teach history. Judaism -- the liturgy, the Torah cycle, the festival calendar -- teaches memory.

Now, we know that our central task on these days is the work of *teshuvah* -- repentance and repair, recovery, response, return. *Teshuvah*, both collectively and personally, is intimately connected to this notion of memory.

Collectively, as a people, our *teshuvah* on these days is largely about remembering who we are as Jews, and remembering that we are one people -- restoring our commitment to our shared memory. We are desperately in need of this.

And individually, too, our personal *teshuvah* is, in a sense, all about improving our memories.

If you think about it, it's kind of odd that Rosh Hashanah is called *Yom HaZikkaron*, the day of memory. Unique among the Jewish holidays, the *Yamim Noraim* have no historical antecedent; they're not commemorating anything. Or, to the extent we've turned Rosh Hashanah into an anniversary, it's the anniversary of the creation of the world or the first human being -- i.e., a time when there was no past. And the main idea, as Professor Yerushalmi says, is that "the 'sinful 'history' of the old year is abolished to make way for a fresh and new beginning."⁴

But properly understood, memory, *teshuvah* and the High Holy Days are all atemporal, beyond time, focusing not on the past per se, but on the connections we're making *now* among the past, present and future -- how the past lives in this moment, and how the future is already contained in the present.

Both with respect to the positive: how do we reclaim our best selves, remember and reintegrate our values, our potential, the parts of ourselves we've lost? How do we remember who we are?

3. Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim, *Zakhor - Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1982), p. 21.

4. Ibid p. 42.

And with respect to the negative: how do we make sense of and rehabilitate the things we've done wrong, the damage we've caused to ourselves and others? and how do we make sense of and rehabilitate the wrongs done to us that we carry with us, year after year after year, unable to forgive, unable to heal? how do we remember who we want to be?

Fortunately, Judaism offers us many mnemonics: daily prayer and study, the annual holiday cycle, and a whole host of mitzvot and practices such as the tzitzit on our tallitot, wearing tefillin, putting a mezuzah on our doors, keeping kosher, blowing the shofar.

And there's one practice in particular -- about which I only recently learned -- and that I want to focus on this year, to help us get a better handle on the relationship between *teshuvah* and memory. There are a number of things about which the Torah commands us, *zakhor*, "remember." The rabbis interpreted that directive "remember" to mean (a) recite them aloud, and (b) do it every day. And so a practice developed of reciting these things, along with the particular verses, every day after the morning service, and many prayerbooks include them. They're known as the *Shesh Zekhirot*, the Six Remembrances -- six things we're supposed to remember every day.

On one level, it's similar to a practice I learned about from Vivian Polak, recommended by time management specialities, that each day you should put in a prominent place (perhaps on your computer or desk) the goals you want to accomplish that day, so you don't get distracted and waste the day. Except this isn't about wasting a day. It's about wasting our lives. And it's not a list of things to do, so much as reminders of how to be.

So here they are, the Six Remembrances:

- 1) the Exodus from Egypt
- 2) standing at Sinai
- 3) the Golden Calf
- 4) the incident with Amalek, and remember to wipe out his name!
- 5) the incident with Miriam, when she thought and spoke ill of her brother, Moses
- 6) Shabbat

Together, they comprise a central core of Jewish memory. And -- and this is why I was so moved when I learned about this -- I believe they help us understand and better practice the process of *teshuvah*, of memory, in the way I've been talking about it.

Each one evokes a cluster of associations; think of them as hyperlinks to entire realms of meanings. And because they are memories, not history, their meaning to us will change -- from day to day, from year to year, from person to person. At the same time, because they constitute memory, they are meaningful to us always: from birth to death, morning to night, in any situation we may find ourselves, and no matter what our theology is -- whether we believe in an interventionist anthropomorphized God, or Oneness that permeates all being, or no God at all.

We'll look at each one in turn over the next two days and on Yom Kippur. Tonight, I want to offer some thoughts about the first one -- *zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim* -- "remember the Exodus from Egypt."

The Exodus is a very rich narrative with infinite meaning, and it's the one we're most familiar with; we associate it obviously with Passover. Yet, in the *kiddush* we just chanted, referring to

Rosh Hashanah as *Yom HaZikkaron*, we continued: “a day for the shofar sound, a day for holy assembly and for recalling the Exodus from Egypt.” So we have to ask, how is it different to recall the Exodus not only on Passover but every day, and how is it different tonight, in the context of Rosh Hashanah, memory and *teshuvah*? *Mah nishtanah halaylah hazeh?*

For one thing, to remember the Exodus from Egypt every day is to remember the possibility of change. Tonight, in the context of our work of *teshuvah*, it means not being a slave to habit, and to old ways of being. It's fairly obvious, I think, once we say it -- but we forget. And if we forget this, the High Holy Days lose their meaning entirely.

Remember every day, that who you were and what you did yesterday needn't dictate today. Remember that you came out of slavery into freedom, and every day, you have a responsibility to choose who and how you're going to be today.

It's a bit paradoxical. The first thing we're told to remember -- the first act of “faithfulness” to our past -- is to remember that change is possible. Not *easy* -- no one ever said it was easy, we're supposed to remember that part of the story too. But it's *possible*, and desirable.

Second, when we remember the Exodus every day, we're reminded to be careful and thoughtful about memory. Why? Because memory can keep us stuck, or it can propel us forward; it can enslave us or free us, and we have to choose.

Research (and experience) show that cognitively, psychologically, memory is a very strict taskmaster. I've said that remembering the Exodus reminds us that who we were yesterday needn't dictate who we are today. And that's true, but it's also a bit more complicated than that.

All of our experiences yesterday -- all of our memories -- provide a filter through which we experience everything today. We don't wake up in the morning as blank slates, objectively experiencing a brand new world. We don't wake up totally free.

And of course, we don't entirely control what we remember and what we forget. We don't even know all the things we remember. We've registered lots of memories unconsciously, and they continue to influence us -- sometimes control us -- unconsciously.

But neither are we utterly without control. Memory, remember, is fluid; it evolves. It shapes our current experience, and it's shaped *by* our current experience, in a continuous feedback loop. If the loop remains unconscious and undirected, it will be a continuing self-reinforcing pattern, and nothing will change. We will be in Egypt.

But the feedback loop needn't remain unconscious and undirected. We can actually influence our memories, and thereby shape our consciousness and our behavior, more than we think.

And here, I need to pause and offer one caveat. I don't want to understate the impact of factors other than memory on our consciousness -- like our bodily chemistry and illness, both physical and mental. Nor can we ignore the seeming intractable damage caused by extreme trauma. Through no fault of our own, some of us have less ability to influence our consciousness than others. But, absent catastrophic cognitive disability or trauma, *all* of us can have *some* influence on how we think. Moreover, none of us has complete control, and fortunately, we're not expected to have complete control. *Teshuvah* generally isn't about becoming perfect, but about becoming better. So the issue here is not complete control, but better or more control, over our consciousness.

How do we do it? One way is simply by remembering to try out new behaviors, attitudes and ways of being. It's about mindfulness, and remembering to act sometimes contrary to our instincts. There's a verse from the psalms that is often quoted in connection with *teshuvah*: *sur me'ra va'aseh tov*, turn from evil and do good. In other words, don't *fardrei* it -- just stop doing this behavior, and start doing this behavior. It turns out that's pretty good advice. When you change your behavior, you change the feedback loop. In other words, the behavioral change can lead the characterological (or in this case neurological) change

And there's another way to change the feedback loop, which speaks directly to this practice of the Six Remembrances. Researchers in cognition speak about "priming" our memories or our consciousness. When certain associations or memories are evoked -- even unconsciously -- they influence how we experience the data we're taking in *now*, how we perceive ourselves and our world *now*, how we act in response, and how we store our experiences as new memories.

A now famous study was conducted at NYU, in which -- in the context of a word game -- some students were exposed to a number of words generally associated with aging. Afterwards, without realizing it, those students *walked* significantly more slowly than their peers who had not been exposed to those words.

Madison Avenue certainly understands this; they evoke your memory of thirst, you feel thirsty, and buy a soda. Political strategists understand it too.

And so did the Torah and the rabbinic tradition. That's precisely what the six daily remembrances are all about: priming our memories, consciously calling to mind certain sets of association in order to shape our consciousness, and our actions.

Remember the Exodus from Egypt. Every day.

By evoking that memory daily, we not only strengthen it, but we prime our consciousness to feel empathy and concern for the vulnerable, to value equality, freedom and justice, and to feel pain and anger when those values are violated. We prime our consciousness to see opportunities for action and change -- in the world around us, and within ourselves in our work of *teshuvah* -- rather than seeing inevitability and impossibility.

Our liturgy tomorrow is filled with references to God "remembering." What we mean, what the Torah means, by "God remembered" is that God re-emerged as an active participant in history: God remembered the Israelites and God's promise, and God acted. Every time we remember that, we prime our consciousness to do the same: to act, to intervene, to translate empathy and possibility into action. We could go on and on.

Each of the Six Remembrances is intended to be a pattern or paradigm, through which all else is experienced, like the warp and woof in the loom of the mind -- organizing principles on which to hang all our impressions and thoughts. The richer the set of associations -- the richer the memory -- the greater the impact.

So in a sense, the central message of remembering the Exodus from Egypt every day is to remember every day that you have the freedom -- and therefore the responsibility -- to shape your own consciousness, which in turn shapes your actions and your very being.

Remember not to allow your consciousness -- your values, your desires and needs, your attitudes, your emotions, our reactions -- to be a slave to popular culture and societal norms.

Instead, deliberately, consciously shape them yourself. Remember not to allow your consciousness -- and your very being -- to be a slave even to your own past, your own memories. Instead, deliberately shape them yourself. Don't just remember your past, "re-member" it; put the pieces together in a new, healthier way. That's what *teshuvah* is all about.

To remember the exodus of Egypt every day is to remember every day to prime your memory in accordance with your values, and your truest self. This is why Rosh Hashanah is called *Yom HaZikaron* -- the Day of Remembrance. And in a way, it's what we mean when we pray that God remember the covenant, remember our ancestors, remember us. We're asking for help in doing the deepest kind of *teshuvah*: remembering who we are, re-membering who we have been, and remembering to choose who to be.

Vatiten lanu, Adonai Eloheinu b'ahavah et Yom HaZikaron hazeh, yom teruah, mikra kodesh, zekher litziyat Mitzrayim...

"With love You have bestowed upon us this Day of Remembrance, a day for the shofar sound, a day for holy assembly and for recalling the Exodus from Egypt"

II Memory and Standing at Sinai (First Day of Rosh Hashanah)

At one of our communal Shabbat dinners early this summer, Ed Gotbetter told a joke, about a rabbi who announced that he was going to speak about the hereafter. From the back of the room, Mr. Goldberg got up to leave, announcing, "I don't have to listen to a sermon about the hereafter. I know all about the hereafter."

"Really?" the rabbi said, "you know all about the hereafter?"
"Sure," said Mr. Goldberg. "Almost every day, I go down to the basement to get something, and by the time I get down there I forget what I'm hereafter."

It's a funny joke, although, as I get older, it's a little less funny than it might once have been. And then, the more I thought about it, it's not funny at all.

Our souls come down into this world, and we forget what we're hereafter. Worse yet, sometimes we don't even remember that we've forgotten.

As I explained last night, our theme this year is memory, and specifically the relationship of memory to *teshuvah*.

What is *teshuvah*? It's often translated as repentance, in the sense of the concrete detail work of figuring out what we've done wrong, apologizing, and repairing. And then on the next level, figuring out why we went astray, and working on our character, changing in a deeper way.

But the word comes from a root meaning return, or respond. And so it refers also to the deeper process of a) remembering our core values and goals and reorienting our lives to be more in tune with them; b) returning to a truer, better self -- remembering who we really are, even if who we really are, is a self we've never yet been.

So *teshuvah* is intimately connected with the question of memory, and is perhaps why, as I noted last night, Rosh Hashanah is called *Yom HaZikkaron*, the Day of Remembrance.

I've been approaching the question of memory by exploring a traditional Jewish practice that I recently learned about, and that really moved me, called the *Shesh Zekhirot*, the Six Remembrances. It's based on a number of verses in the Torah commanding, "*zakhor*, remember" some specific things. And because "remember" was interpreted to mean (a) say it aloud, and (b) do it every day, the practice developed -- many prayerbooks have this -- of reciting these six things aloud after the daily prayer service each morning. It being a Jewish practice, there are different versions -- some list only four or five, others ten -- but the most common are these six:

- 1) the Exodus from Egypt
- 2) standing at Sinai
- 3) the Golden Calf
- 4) the incident with Amalek, and remember to wipe out his name!
- 5) the incident with Miriam, when she thought and spoke ill of her brother, Moses
- 6) Shabbat

I'm captivated by this. Though I'm generally not a fan of reductionism, this is a pretty compelling list of basic Jewish literacy,- the core components of Jewish memory. But more than that, our tradition seems to have intuited what we're now learning about memory, and how it works:

Our memories are always with us, shaping and being shaped by the information flowing through our senses, in a continuous feedback loop. Everything we see, hear, and smell is inflected by all the things we've seen, heard and smelled in the past.⁵

It's no surprise that our memories unconsciously shape how we perceive the world, and how we act in the present. Our memories define who we are.

It's a little less obvious that we can "prime" our memories to influence our consciousness and *behavior* in particular ways. In a famous NYU study, students were exposed, in an seemingly random way, to words usually associated with the elderly. Afterwards they exhibited behavior associated with being older -- they walked significantly more slowly -- without even realizing it. In other words, particular words or ideas we encounter cause related thoughts and *behaviors* to emerge faster, even automatically, unconsciously.

Mostly, we're "primed" by external sources, without our knowing -- advertising for example. But we can, of course, choose to "prime" our memories ourselves. All of a sudden, the importance of beginning our day with prayer, for example, takes on new meaning. When we start the day with expressions of gratitude, with repeated expressions of blessing and assertions of meaning, we are more likely to see reasons to be grateful, to experience other events of the day as blessings, to find meaning.

And, that's why this practice of the Six Remembrances blew me away. These six things aren't just a knowledge base. They're essential teachings to prime and shape our consciousness. They're paradigms, patterns, each with a wealth of interpretations and associations; they're clusters of meaning, which will reverberate in our lives in different ways at different times of year, at different times in life, even from day to day.

Last night I spoke about the first one: remember the Exodus from Egypt. And I said that the Exodus is a daily reminder that change is possible, and specifically, that we can change our consciousness. We have the freedom (and therefore the obligation) to consciously prime our memories, shaping our own thoughts and experiences. In turn, our memories are changed -- "re-membered" as it were -- by our current circumstances and changed consciousness. We can, in this way, shape the past to create a healthier, more whole present. We're not enslaved to our past selves or our memories. We can do *teshuvah*.

This morning, we turn to number two: *zekhirat ma'amad Har Sinai*, remember standing at Mount Sinai. Three months after coming out of Egypt we stood as a people at Mt. Sinai, and experienced revelation.

Yes, we're free to shape our consciousness. But Judaism isn't value neutral or contentless. We've been told what to shape our consciousness *with*: it's called the Torah.

Indeed, that's what these six remembrances are: Torah. Five stories, and one experience we're commanded to have, Shabbat. We might have expected religion to focus on big ideas like "God is One", or ethical principles such as "Love your neighbor as yourself." But no -- here, we're told to remember stories. Partly because stories are easier to remember (contemporary cognitive research memory backs this up), but mostly, because stories are the most effective

5. Foer, Joshua, *Moonwalking with Einstein -- The Art and Science of Remembering Everything* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), page 67.

for this work of patterning, of connecting our own life experiences to the story we're remembering, of *merging* our personal narratives with the Torah's narratives.

Jews have six senses. Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing . . . memory. . . . The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks -- when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather's fingers fell asleep while stroking his great-grandfather's damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knife point to be sure Isaac would feel no pain -- that the Jew is able to know why it hurts.

When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: *What does it remember like?*⁶

What does this have to do with *teshuvah*?

Well, *teshuvah* is about remembering our truest selves. And it turns out, paradoxically, that the best way to do that is by connecting the self with something beyond the self, by asking, in a sense, "What do I remember like?"

Many of you know the famous midrash from the Talmud (Niddah 30b), that before we're born, our souls are taught the whole Torah from beginning to end. But as soon as we enter the world, an angel touches us on the mouth and causes us to forget the Torah completely. That's why we have this little indentation above our mouths -- it's the mark left by the angel's touch. In essence, the midrash is a poetic way of saying three things:

- 1) The experience of Sinai, of learning anything really essential, deep, and transformative -- what we call Torah -- will feel like an experience of remembering, of returning to something that was always part of us, but that perhaps we never knew.
- 2) Everything we really need to learn or become is already within us. We just have to remember. That's why Judaism expresses the concept of personal transformation with the word, *teshuvah*, "return."
- 3) The way to remember it, is through the Torah.

It's a somewhat counter-cultural idea today. We're very self-directed; as Arnie Eisen says, we live in a culture of the "sovereign self." We reserve the right to make our own choices, define our own values, shape our own lives. The central image of Rosh Hashanah -- crowning God as Sovereign -- feels alien to many of us. Much less a text -- the Torah -- telling me what to do, who to be, even we might say, commanding!

And it's also a little scary. We're so hungry for it, and we're so afraid of it. We're hungry because we're lonely -- not because we don't have enough people in our lives, but because we miss ourselves. And we're afraid because the only way to find ourselves, is to allow ourselves to be claimed by something beyond ourselves. To give up being 100% sovereign. And, of course, if we take seriously the idea that something beyond us has a claim on us, what would that mean? How would we have to change? It's a well-founded fear, believe me. Once upon a time, I was a happily practicing lawyer.

So of the Six Remembrances, remembering standing at Sinai is, in a sense, the biggest, most far reaching one, and probably also the hardest. What does it mean?

At the simplest level, it's about studying Torah every day. This is fundamental.

6. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, p. 198 (quoted in Kurtzer, *Shuva*, p. 147).

But Torah study is anything but simple. It's not so much about acquiring knowledge of Judaism (though that's a good thing); it's about acquiring Jewish memory. It is precisely about consciously shaping our consciousness. And it's not only -- or even primarily-- an intellectual exercise, which we approach with objective distance. We study Torah (in it's broadest sense -- the Hebrew Bible itself, plus commentaries, interpretations, midrash, Talmud -- the whole body of Jewish literature), with our whole being, and we do it in order to be transformed by it.

Sometimes consciously transformed; we read something and say, wow, that's so meaningful and important, I want to be more like that. And sometimes unconsciously; we find ourselves changed -- our thoughts and behaviors are different -- and we can't quite explain how or why that happened. In a sense, like good therapy.

I remember the first time I really felt this. I was walking in Riverside Park on a lovely day, and I felt a gentle breeze. Into my head popped, "and they heard the sound of Adonai God walking in the garden at the breezy time of day." And I knew I had been changed. When did I remembering Biblical verses like that? But more importantly, suddenly Riverside Park was also the Garden of Eden. And the breeze rustling the trees was also the sound of God's presence. And my reality was connected -- infused -- with a transcendent reality.

Of course, there have been many times where I've felt changed by Torah in other ways: pushed to do a mitzvah I'd rather not do, that's inconvenient, or hard, pushed out of my comfort zone.

As Yehudah Kurtzer says, "*Where history informs, memory commands.*"⁷ Not necessarily "command" in the narrow sense of adherence to halakhah (which is a good thing, don't get me wrong), but in the much broader sense we've been talking about: being molded -- claimed -- by the Torah.

It *is* scary. And it's *hugely* important. Not only for our own personal *teshuvah*, which we'll return to that in a minute. But because it's our responsibility as Jews.

The primary, formative, covenantal, commanding Jewish moment, is Sinai. Torah is the record of our collective, shared Jewish memory. It's the basis of Jewish peoplehood, the glue that holds us together.

Our *maḥzor* is a good example. We were able to present -- on one page -- medieval liturgy in conversation with a hasidic teaching of the Baal Shem Tov from the 18th century and a poem by contemporary secular Israeli poet Yehudah Amichai, because all three authors share a memory of Sinai, and feel commanded by it. The don't necessarily feel bound by Jewish law in the same way, or even at all. But they feel commanded in the sense of being being responsible and responsive to Torah.

If we don't remember Sinai -- if we don't know our people's stories, and allow ourselves to be molded by them; if we don't have as they say, a *yiddishe kopf* -- we are contributing to the dissolution of the Jewish people.

It's very easy for liberal Jews to point fingers at certain other Jewish groups, and accuse them of being divisive. But we have a responsibility too. If we want to be part of the conversation, have an impact, we have to have Torah. Not *know* Torah, dispassionately; but *have* Torah, as part of

7. Kurtzer, *Shuva*, p. 27.

our being.

Which doesn't mean that we all interpret -- remember -- the Torah, in the same way. There's a wonderful phrase in Avishai Margalit's book *The Ethics of Memory*; he says that shared memory (which is what Torah, Jewish memory is) involves "a division of mnemonic labor." Think about two people trying to remember a phone number, so one person remembers the first three digits, and the other person the last four.

Remembering standing at Sinai is like that. We were each there, we all stood at Sinai, as did our ancestors and our descendants, and each of us "remembers" a different piece of it. Somewhat like awakening from a common dream, in which each of us remembers a different aspect of it. And in a community of memory like Judaism, the responsibility for shared memory is on *every* person in that community. Unless you, personally, remember your share in the Torah, it will be forgotten.

We'll each be changed by Torah in different ways and -- just as our personal memories both shape and *are shaped by* our current experience -- we'll each change our collective memory in different ways. It's called *midrash*, our great tradition of interpretive creativity. Your Torah isn't the same as mine, because our experiences are different. And we -- the Jewish people -- need *your* Torah.

But to come back to our personal *teshuvah* -- remembering our truest selves by remembering to stand at Sinai -- it's not only about studying text, and it's not about the past. The essential thing to remember about standing at Sinai, is that it isn't just a memory. When you begin each day, remember that you stand on Mt. Sinai *today*. Always.

Zekhirat ma'amad Sinai is about priming your consciousness to experience everything -- every situation, experience, and person -- as having something to teach you. Something potentially revelatory and revolutionary. Something commanding.

We pray on these High Holy Days for *orekh yamim*, "length of days." Not just more days, but long, meaningful days. And the older we get, the more that prayer hits us in the *kishkes*. Not only because we have a sharper sense of our mortality, but because time seems to move faster and faster. Research suggests that the reason that happens is because as we get older, we don't learn as much, so life gets less memorable, and time speeds up.

The best way to slow down time is to learn. And if that's true of learning new skills, all the more so, learning new ways of being. You want *orekh yamim*, length of days? Remember to stand at Sinai every day.

Now, if that means more than studying Torah, how do we do it? After all, we can't force transformational learning. We can't create revelatory moments -- whether we think of that as an encounter with God or, in non-theistic terms, an encounter with Truth.

But we can make ourselves available, create the preconditions. We can make sure we're on the mountain. If you're working on your laptop or iPad and you get that message, "unable to connect to the internet," what do you do? Turn your wireless on.

Which may be why most commentators understand *zekhirat ma'amad har Sinai*, "remember standing at Sinai" as a command to remember the *experience* of revelation -- the process, rather than the content. It is of course, something of a false dichotomy. Because how do we know

about the experience of Sinai? From the Torah itself! Which teaches:

First, the reality of revelation. Remember that it's possible. It's possible to encounter God, and transformative Truth. It's possible to have an experience of something beyond ourselves, beyond what we are able to fully comprehend with our sense and our intellects, which nevertheless makes a claim on us. Commands. Don't allow yourself to become cynical, suspicious, dismissive. Be open to revelatory moments, when you sense or learn something that you know is so deep and so true, even if you can't fully articulate or even understand the content. And when you have those moments, trust them. Stay faithful to your personal "Sinai's", and keep them as living, vital memories. Every day.

Second, it turns out that *ma'amad* -- "standing" -- at Sinai is a misnomer. In envisioning the Sinai experience, the rabbis imagined the people in constant motion, being knocked off their feet by every word -- literally blown back about twelve miles -- and pushed back into place by the angels. To remember *standing* at Sinai is to remember that standing still -- being stationary -- is an illusion; we're either moving forward or backward. It's to remember that in order to learn, we need to be willing to move, even to be completely blown away.

And at the same time, remembering "standing" but not standing at Sinai is to remember that all deep learning involves regression as well as progress. Another midrash imagines Moses on the mountain learning and forgetting and relearning the Torah over and over again.⁸ Real learning is like that; *teshuvah* is like that. Just when we think we've learned to watch what we say, or to be more generous, or not to let that particular button get pushed, or whatever we're working on -- we find ourselves falling right back into old patterns. We can't expect to learn and grow in a linear way. So we can have some compassion on ourselves if we feel ourselves in retreat. We just have to remember to let the angels push us forward again.

Third, remember that when you stood at Sinai, you weren't alone. We were all there -- some six-hundred-thousand-plus people. You can't find your true self by your self; you need to be part of community. A community across time and space, by means of text -- the collective shared memory of our people. And a real live in person community -- other people who have something to teach us.

To remember standing at Sinai is to remember that Truth is shared memory; so long as we think we have a complete or exclusive truth, we know better than everyone, we can never learn. Some of our most profound, transformational learning -- our Sinai moments -- can only come from engaging with people with whom we profoundly disagree. To remember Sinai is to cultivate the humility of learning with and from others, to remember to be part of a learning community.

And that means remembering also: you are a teacher. We have in Judaism a concept called *mareit ayin*, roughly akin to the American legal notion of "the appearance of impropriety." It's based on notion that we're all role models for each other; we all represent the Torah, it lives in us. And someone -- in addition to Some One -- is always watching, and potentially emulating us. Everything we do has communal consequences, for good or bad. When we do something base, morally suspect, uncaring -- we make it a little bit easier for the next person to do the same. And when we act nobly, unselfishly, honorably, lovingly -- we encourage someone else to do the same.

8. Nedarim 38a R. Yoḥanan also said: At first Moses used to study the Torah and forget it, until it was given to him as a gift, for it is said, And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him [. . . two tables of testimony].

Some of my most profound Sinai moments have been someone saying just the right thing at the right time, or seeing something in me I hadn't seen, whether good or bad. Or even more powerfully, behaving in a way that set me back on my heels -- that moved me in it's strength and dignity, or compassion, or generosity. God "speaks" in many ways. You can be someone else's Sinai.

And finally, it's true, we can't create revelatory moments. But we can make ourselves available, create the preconditions. And we learn about those conditions not only from the Torah narrative, but from our own Sinai experiences.

Remembering standing at Sinai is about asking yourself every day: what has lead to the most transformative, powerful learning in your life? Where were you? What were you doing, or not doing? Who were you with? What was going on inside of you? What were you feeling, thinking?

And then, are you doing those things now? How can you better recreate your personal conditions of Sinai for yourself -- at least for a few moments -- today, and every day?

Remember to go to the mountain. So that you'll remember, what you've always known, but haven't yet learned.

III Memory and the Golden Calf (Second Day Rosh Hashanah)

We've been speaking about the Jewish notion of memory, and the relationship between memory and *teshuvah*. Specifically, we've been focusing on the daily practice of the *Shesh Zekhirot*, the Six Remembrances, which we are supposed to remember every day, to shape our consciousness. You'll remember (I hope!) what they are:

- 1) the Exodus from Egypt
- 2) standing at Sinai
- 3) the Golden Calf
- 4) the incident with Amalek, and remember to wipe out his name!
- 5) the incident with Miriam, when she thought and spoke ill of her brother, Moses
- 6) Shabbat

We've spoken already about remembering the Exodus from Egypt and remembering standing at Sinai -- "remembrances" which are, on the whole, positive, evoking our gratitude. They imbue us with a sense of responsibility, yes, but primarily they awaken in us a sense of empowerment, blessing -- an awareness of God's presence in our lives.

Now we shift gears, and to *zekhirat masa avoteinu bamidbar*, "remember how your ancestors tested God in the wilderness," and specifically remember the sin of the Golden Calf. What was the incident of the Golden Calf? Just a few weeks after being redeemed from Egypt and receiving the Torah -- while the people are still gathered around Mt. Sinai -- Moses goes back up the mountain alone at God's command. By the time he comes back down, the people have already begun to engage in idolatry; they've built a statue of a calf, made out of gold, and have started to worship it. And this incident is considered to be the single greatest sin committed by the Israelites in the whole Torah narrative.

So why start our day remembering something negative, especially something that our ancestors did so long ago in the past?

In the most general sense, this is a daily reminder not to avoid hard truths about ourselves, whether we're talking personally, or collectively as communities, Jews, Americans. True, some of us dwell obsessively on every mistake, and of course, there's a limit; the goal is not to wallow in our own wrongdoing and sense of inadequacy. But neither is the answer to avoid thinking about our failures entirely.

This is the season, of course, when we are especially called to do the work of *teshuvah*, part of which is *heshbon hanefesh*, "an accounting of the soul." But it's not supposed to be limited to this time of year. It's supposed to be a daily practice of taking honest stock of the previous day, including our failings, the things we find embarrassing -- things which oftentimes, we just push away from our consciousness .

And as I've said, this practice of the Six Remembrances -- indeed the whole idea of Jewish memory, in general -- isn't really about the past. It's about mythic time, ongoing patterns or paradigms which that repeat regularly, now.

So the list includes remembering positive stories -- priming our consciousness to see opportunities for change, learning, growth, redemption. Priming our consciousness for gratitude, and empowerment. And it includes some negative paradigms, so we can become better at identifying them, and more adept at managing them.

Especially here.

In this particular case, it's not just that each generation or person is likely to repeat the sin of the Golden Calf. The problem is that we're likely to do it repeatedly. The Golden Calf is a reminder of the all-too-human trait of recidivism, a reminder of how hard it is to maintain moral ethical gains, spiritual growth, the fruits of *teshuvah*. In this sense it's a kind of companion piece to remembering Sinai, that we spoke about yesterday. I talked about remembering transformational moments in our lives, trusting them and staying true to them, keeping them vital. This is about our remembering our tendency to forget them, and relapse.

What will happen to the insights we have, the inner work that we do, on these Yamim Noraim, after Yom Kippur? We can't complacently assume, "I've learned my lesson." We have to remember how vulnerable we are to forgetting everything we thought we'd learned. And when we do, we do *teshuvah*.

The High Holy Days are built precisely on this pattern. The Golden Calf is *the* central narrative underlying the drama of this whole season. When we say that on the 17th day of Tammuz Moses came down from the mountain, saw the people worshipping the Golden Calf and smashed the tablets, spent the next sixty days working at atonement, and finally attained complete forgiveness for the people on Yom Kippur, it's not so much about tracking the calendar. It's a way of saying that this is a pattern of failure and forgiveness that is deeply embedded in our Jewish memory.

When we experience our own behavior through this lens, whether it's Rosh Hashanah or a random day in February, we are thus primed to make certain associations:

- 1) Yes, I've failed. I'm not alone, this is part of the human condition.
- 2) There is a path forward; forgiveness and reconciliation is possible
- 3) It's incumbent on me to do the work
- 4) The stakes in my doing so are significant. It's not just about me; I'm part of something larger.

That's what Jewish memory does. It lifts us out of our particular moment in time, and connects us to a longer, larger story. And the Golden Calf becomes our shared memory of the wide gap between our aspirations and the reality of where we are, collectively and personally, now and throughout time.

But why specifically the Golden Calf? There are lots of stories of disappointments, failures and sins in the Torah. Why is this particular thing one of the six things to remember every day? Is idolatry really such a common problem today?

The short answer is. . . yes. It's not just a common problem, but *the* most common, and elemental problem.

Idolatry isn't limited to literally bowing down to an object. Any time we make something into an absolute -- other than God (or, in non-theistic language ultimate Truth or Meaning or whatever metaphor works best for you) -- we have a Golden Calf problem.

I think it's obvious that we can turn the physical objects of our desire into Golden Calves: e.g., material goods or a certain standard of living. Here in the Hamptons, we are surrounded by Golden Calves of wealth, monumental examples of the way in which human desires for bigger, better, newer, more prestigious things overshadows any sense of values and in some cases ethics.

And not just material things: success, fame, and power can become Golden Calves. Or our careers and our work. Fitting in and societal approval. Even our own needs -- ego needs, emotional needs, our personal happiness or comfort -- can become a Golden Calf, if they become our highest value, or if we allow our happiness or comfort to override things we know are more important, or claim to value more .

It's not that these things don't matter, they do; in some cases they're very important. It's just that they're not absolutes, they're not the *ultimate* value. And we forget.

Think about the environment. Why is it so hard for us to make real change, despite all we know about the impact of our behavior on our world? Because some of us stand to lose a lot of money if we really change the way we consume, and because all of us at times put our comfort ahead of our values.

Nearly anything can become a Golden Calf.

For example, religion. The practice or forms of religion, if they become ends in themselves, rather than paths toward the Divine, can become a Golden Calf. It can happen in our relationship to the halakhah or a particular community's traditions. It happens sometimes in our relationship to the Wall. In some synagogues, the building itself becomes a Golden Calf. There are people who choose a synagogue based on the beauty of the building, rather than what happens *in* that building -- whether the synagogue is place where one can be challenged to grow, whether the community and the services and activities are conducive to deep and meaningful connection with God, other people, and one's self. I once heard someone say of an especially attractive synagogue, "it's a beautiful building, but God doesn't live there." And sometimes the financial demands of the building begin to drive the whole agenda of the congregation, often warping the community's values in the process. So as challenging as it is for us here at CSH not to have our own building (and it is challenging), more often than I'm frustrated I'm grateful that we don't -- that we're not tempted by that particular Golden Calf.

The past can become a Golden Calf. Jewish memory should never be confused with nostalgia, which romanticizes and idealizes the past; that's one of the reasons why it's important to remember negative as well as positive. Nostalgia can be lovely, and useful, but when we substitute it for memory, there's a danger that our idealized image of what *was* will become more important than what *is* and what *should be*. At best, we get stuck and lose our vitality. At worst, idolizing the past can have serious moral and ethical consequences. It's a Golden Calf.

Our own intellects can become Golden Calves. I hope I don't need to say that I'm not anti-intellectual or anti-science; neither is Judaism. Anything but. I'm talking instead about the illusion that our intellects are somehow infallible, and the elevation of rational thought as the *only* legitimate way to experience reality.

In a sense, the whole episode of the Golden Calf was caused by an over-reliance on data. Moses said I'll be back in forty days. When he didn't come as expected, the people panicked, and built the Golden Calf. It turns out, they were a day early; they counted wrong.

Today we worship data. It's so seductive; it feels so solid, so reliable. "The numbers don't lie." We forget how misleading, based on erroneous premises, or just plain wrong it can be. After all, who can't count to forty? And before we know it, we've built a Golden Calf.

And this particular Golden Calf is particularly limiting. Some of us are unable -- or unwilling -- to develop a Jewish memory precisely because we've made a Golden Calf of our intellects. We're comfortable with history; it's rational, and it's distant, out there. It doesn't demand anything of us. And it's easy enough to push away the claims of religion, or dismiss the Torah, through rational critique and historical criticism.

But as we said yesterday, Sinai -- Torah -- isn't exclusively, or even primarily, an intellectual experience. Torah, memory, and faith (they're all intimately connected) are about being moved and transformed in ways in we don't totally understand. Deep truth -- transformational learning -- cannot be acquired by rational processes alone. Many of the most important things in life can only be understood, and properly valued, with the heart and soul -- with the fullness of our being.

Chief among them: a human being.

Technology has given us so much data about ourselves, but very little insight. We can wear a bracelet that tells us how many steps we've taken, how much of each kind of sleep we've had, all kinds of amazing data. I have one; it's fabulous, and very cool. It's also very helpful in pushing me to walk more. But at the same time, it scares the hell out of me, because it feels potentially dehumanizing. For a long time I couldn't precisely locate the source of my discomfort, but as I was preparing these teachings, I remembered a quote from Abraham Joshua Heschel, that I realized I'd been subconsciously responding to. In his book *Who is Man?* (p. 24) Heschel points out that "[i]n pre-Nazi Germany the following statement of man was frequently quoted":

The human body contains a sufficient amount of fat to make seven cakes of soap, enough iron to make a medium-sized nail, a sufficient amount of phosphorous to equip two thousand match-heads, enough sulphur to rid one's self of one's fleas.

"Perhaps there was a connection," he suggests, "between this statement and what the Nazis actually did in the extermination camps: make soap of human flesh." Now obviously, I'm not saying that these bio-feedback devices will lead to a Holocaust. But, if we make a Golden calf of our intellect -- if we forget that it's a tool, useful but limited -- we will, eventually, lose our humanity.

OK, we've talked some of the Golden Calves we make today. Why do we make them?

First, we make Golden Calves when we're anxious, or dealing with uncertainty. In essence, the Golden Calf was an object constancy problem. Moses was gone a little too long, and the people got scared, too anxious to remember what they had just learned.

We too forget who we are, who and what we care about, when we're anxious or stressed. It happens with major threats; many peoples have lost their freedoms, or otherwise significantly

compromised their values, in a time of fear. Any time we hear fear-mongering from a politician, we should think Golden Calf. And it happens with minor stresses and anxieties in our everyday lives -- that's when we're likely to be forgetful and behave badly, forgetting our values and life goals, forgetting who we are. It's when we're most likely to hurt -- or hold grudges against -- the people we love, forgetting in the moment how much we love them.

Second, we make Golden Calves when we're bored and distracted. The Israelites paid attention -- stayed with the program -- during the Exodus from Egypt itself, and at Sinai, during the big flashy miracles and the drama. Then they were waiting around the mountain for a long time, and they forgot the lessons that they learned when things were really dramatic.

We do the same. We all have intense moments, that bring a heightened sense of reality, of the weightiness of being. It could be a crisis -- medical, professional, or relational; something that suddenly makes our mortality, the stakes of life, real. It could be a great joy -- becoming a parent or grandparent, a peak professional milestone. Something that wakes us up, and suddenly our heads are screwed on straight and our values are crystal clear. Hopefully, the High Holy Days do that; that's what they're here for. But then the moment passes, and we're hanging around the mountain waiting for the next big thing; we're bored, we get distracted, and we forget

At the Golden Calf, it took 39 days. For us, we're lucky if we can keep our attention for 39 minutes. Think about sitting at your computer. How many times do you see something really inspiring and elevating -- someone posts some pithy quote about what really matters in life, or the importance of time, or you watch some video about somebody doing amazing good in the world and you say, "wow, that's so true, it's so powerful." And not even 39 minutes, but 39 seconds later you're clicking on a shopping link, or some ridiculous or degrading waste of time or worse. It's a Golden Calf problem. We can't seem to remember what we know to be true.

And one of the reasons we're so easily distracted from our core values and deep truths is because most of the time, the soul doesn't speak to us in grand gestures and drama. Yes, there are the big moments. "The great shofar blows." But mostly, the life of the spirit is quiet, gentle, ordinary. The small still voice. And it takes a lot of time, patience and focus to hear what it's telling us. We have to consciously remind ourselves to listen.

Our desires, on the other hand -- and our anxieties for that matter -- are constantly calling at us, loud and clear, demanding our attention. Not to mention the bombardment by the media, internet and popular culture in general.

So remembering the Golden Calf every day is partly about training ourselves to respond better in times of stress and anxiety, and in times of boredom, in the everyday. It's about training our memories to bracket both seductions/desires and fears/anxieties -- both of which distract us -- and remember our commitments, our mission, who we are. It's about priming our consciousness to be able to remember our values and our truest selves when times get tough, so that, hopefully, over time, it happens automatically. It's called character.

That's why it's important to remember the Golden Calf every day. To take a moment and ask ourselves, what am I "worshipping" right now in my life? Not what I claim to value, but how am I actually spending my time and energy? My money? What occupies my thoughts? What's really driving my decisions? Because any time we lose track of our values and most fundamental commitments, we've likely created a Golden Calf

Or to put it another way, any time we forget our humanity -- both our nobility and our humility, our power and our limits -- it's symptomatic of a Golden Calf problem. Sometimes we create Golden Calves when we feel too small and insignificant. In the original story, the Israelites thought they needed Moses as an intermediary, that they couldn't connect with God on their own. Judaism teaches and emphasizes that every person possesses creaturely dignity, is unique in the world with a unique mission, and is of infinite significance. As the Hasidic teaching goes, everyone should have a piece of paper in their pocket saying, "the world was created for me." When we forget that, we often look for other ways to feel important, or powerful, or safe, and we build a Golden Calf.

But of course, that's only one side of the story. It happens to be an aspect of Judaism which dovetails nicely with our current ethos of "positive reinforcement" -- emphasizing self-worth, self-acceptance, and self-fulfillment. But there's a dark side to all this emphasis on our individual significance. We can start to think of ourselves as having *supreme* significance -- and we make a Golden Calf of our own selves. That's why we're also supposed to have another pocket, with a different message, "I am but dust and ashes."

It's a reminder to us as individuals, and as a people. Samson Raphael Hirsch -- writing in late 19th century Germany -- understood remembering the Golden Calf as a daily reminder to the people Israel (and in our day to the nation Israel) that we can't just sit back and count on the promise to our ancestors:

No nation, no community, no individual, however important their mission might be for God's Work on earth, can imagine that they are indispensable for God's Work on earth, and in that conceit, give themselves over to sin.

It's a reminder that none of us -- as individuals, in our communities or as a people -- is "too big to fail." Or in the language of the Yom Kippur liturgy, "We are neither so arrogant nor so stiffnecked as to say before you, we are righteous and have not sinned. *Aval, anaḥnu va'avoteinu ḥatanu* -- rather, we along with our ancestors have sinned."

So in this sense, the Golden Calf is the paradigmatic sin precisely because it's not a specific act of wrongdoing, but rather the root cause of a lot of wrongdoing: a basic mis-orientation in life, a basic misunderstanding of our place in the world. Remembering the Golden Calf is about locating ourselves properly vis-a-vis the Divine -- that we are empowered but not all-powerful, important but not supremely important. That we are called to write our individual life stories -- to exercise our will -- but we don't write in a vacuum; our story is but a chapter in a much longer book, and we need to write, and edit accordingly. Fundamentally, that's what Rosh Hashanah -- crowning God as sovereign, *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance, *teshuvah* -- is all about.

Which takes us to the last thing we need to remember about the Golden Calf: the end of that story. Moses goes back up the mountain and gives God an ultimatum: either forgive the people, or "blot my name out from Your book." And God responds "the one who has sinned against Me, I will blot out from My book" (see Exodus 32:32-37).

We've been talking about remembering; we also want to be remembered. We all crave, on some level, a lasting impact, a measure of immortality. And that desire -- improperly channeled -- is the cause of an awful lot of Golden Calves. And it's a tragedy, because the central message of the story of the Golden Calf is that Golden Calves not only *result* from our forgetting, they *lead* to us being forgotten. Erased from the book.

We will not be remembered for the Golden Calves we create -- no matter how impressive, seemingly lasting, or beautiful. We will be remembered for the times we gave of ourselves, and got over ourselves. The times we stood by our values, and stood by a friend. We'll be remembered for sharing our gifts, and sharing in the joys and pains of our loved ones, our people and humanity. We will be remembered to the extent we ourselves remember who we are.

בְּסֵפֶר חַיִּים. בְּרָכָה וְשָׁלוֹם. . . נִזְכָּר וְנִכְתָּב לְפָנֶיךָ.

In the book of life, blessing, peace, sustenance and goodness, may we be remembered and inscribed before You. We, along with the people Israel. For good life, and for peace.