

## **Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780: Zichronot- The Power of Memory**

The High Holy Days are a season of renewal, joy, repentance, and memory. Our community bursts at the seams as we come together to pray, to learn, to catch up with old friends and perhaps to make new ones. And we know there is so much more to the Holy Days than coming to synagogue. There are invitations and cards to send, caterers to hire, open houses and dinners to attend, break fasts to indulge. The rituals at synagogue are but one piece of the bigger human rituals revolving around these days.

Zichronot, memory, the second thematic heading of the shofar service, reminds us that this holiday season is not our first. If this IS the first Rosh Hashanah for someone in your family as is the case with mine, bring your baby to the tot service tomorrow morning for a special blessing! For the rest of us, zichronot teaches a maxim that I learned a while ago. We Jews do not have history. We have memory<sup>1</sup>.

Memory is what connects us cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually with what happened before. Whether it is recalling what we ate for lunch or an event which took place thousands of years ago, we know that memory brings with it certain feelings, positive and negative. With the advent of modern psychology, we understand that memory can be powerful and help us or harm us depending on the circumstances and what it conjures forth.

Judaism has always relied on the power of memory. Our next series of prayers, the Amidah, begins with the avot v'imahot, the prayer of our fathers and mothers. As we do every service, we will recall the names of our patriarchs and matriarchs, connecting each of them individually to God and praising that relationship. This liturgical act connects them to us and to our own ancestors. Even though none of us has any personal memory of those events, by recalling their names, the prayer links us in what we call *shalsholet hakabalah*, the chain of tradition.

Tomorrow, as we hear the shofar, we will be linked to all who have heard its blasts before us. Like the avot v'imahot, the shofar's cries are directed toward us and toward God. We

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<sup>1</sup> As heard in a lecture by Dr. Avraham Infeld, President Emeritus of Hillel International, circa 2003

pray that God, through the hearing of the shofar, will remember us. It is not as if God has forgotten us, but rather the hope is that God will remember the merit of our ancestors. As their descendants, God will extend that merit to us and we will receive Divine compassion and mercy. In his writings on the shofar service, Maimonides teaches that the readings chosen for *zichronot* must focus on the community, not one's individual memory. This teaches that although memory itself is personal, we are bound together by our past experiences and through our common hopes for the future.

The power of memory in Judaism is undeniable. On Yom Kippur morning, we will read *nitzavim*, which teaches that all of us stood together at Sinai. On the shabbat before Purim we are reminded to remember the evil Amalek by blotting out his name and by not forgetting him. And during Passover, we read in our Haggadot *b'chol dor vador*, in every generation a person should see oneself as if they personally came out from Egypt. Our Jewish memories are with us throughout the year inspiring and guiding us as we go through our lives.

This is a time to remember. Remember the holidays of your childhood and remember your loved ones who are no longer here. As we invoke Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, think about your not so distant ancestors whose presence you feel now. As Rosh Hashanah recalls the creation of the world, recall those who influenced and impacted you the most. Perhaps you are thinking of a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a mentor, a colleague, a friend. Our memory is that we all stood together at Sinai, so who stood next to you? Whose Judaism influenced and inspired your own? Who is here with you tonight in your memory?

As the seasons turn and we begin a new year together, we begin 5780 carrying our memory forward. As it has been passed down to us, we commit to extending it to the generations to come. I will tell my children about my grandparents and the stories of their parents and their parents parents, who came to America as many of our not so distant ancestors did, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seeking a better life. My family will light the bronze candlesticks that bear the names of my great great grandparents, fashioned somewhere in that old world and brought to the new to keep the flame of Judaism alive. I did not know my great great grandparents, but I remember them now as we remember all who came before. As the new year begins, let our collective memory be stirred by the names of the *avot v'imahot* and by the blasts

of the shofar. May we be granted joy, strength, and renewal, and may we be inspired and comforted by the power of memory.