



The memories that keep Judaism alive



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Information is more accessible now than it has ever has been. The internet has brought much of the collective knowledge of humankind to our fingertips. So why should we try to actually remember anything when it is so easy to instantly look it up online? Why try to hold stuff in your *head* when you can download it from a device that you hold in your *hand*? The reason is that *human* memory is so much more than the mechanistic accessibility to storage data. When we *re*-member something, we *re*-connect with it in multiple ways and enable that information to shape our whole perspective. Our sense of self is actually the meaning we weave together out of memorable experiences from our past. Our conscious and sub-conscious memories frame our very being, provide us with a personal history, and so define our humanity.

That is why the Hebrew Bible employs the word *zachor*, meaning 'remember', so pervasively. It appears 169 times in its various forms. Through biblical festivals and rituals the people of Israel were *commanded to remember* decisive events in their history. This served to shape their national identity and map out their future. Such a religious awareness and focus on recalling history was unique in the ancient world. Time, back then, was seen as cyclic. Only the founding myths of pagan cultures were viewed as significant, not its ongoing history. This is borne out by the paucity of ancient historically focused texts that have been found. Though Herodotus came to be called the 'father of history', even for him it just served to prevent the glorious achievements and political realisations of the Greeks from being forgotten. But history had no religious meaning *in itself*, it did not have an overarching *purpose*. That notion was introduced

in the Bible: 'It was ancient Israel that first assigned a decisive significance to history and thus forged a new world-view whose essential premises were eventually appropriated by Christianity and Islam as well. "The heavens," in the words of the psalmist, might still "declare the glory of the Lord," but it was human history that revealed his will and purpose. This novel perception was not the result of philosophical speculation, but of the peculiar nature of the Israelite faith. It emerged out of an intuitive and revolutionary understanding of God, and was refined through profoundly felt historical experiences.'¹

Memory was, in fact, a religious imperative for both the Israelites *and* God. This essay will thus focus on three aspects of biblical memory from a Jewish perspective: the imperative for *us* to remember, what it means for *God* to remember and, finally, a comment on the intriguing issue of why God finds humanity memorable at all.

The six remembrances

The Five Books of Moses, known to Jews as the Torah, commands the children of Israel to remember six particular events. Thus there is a Jewish tradition to recite these six memories everyday at the conclusion of morning prayers. They bring to mind key elements of the Torah as well as the living faith and historical mindset that it engenders. Here is how they appear in the *Siddur*, the Jewish prayer book:

'That you may remember the day you left the land of Egypt all the days of your life.'
(Deuteronomy 16.3)

'Only be very careful and watch yourself lest you forget ... the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horev (Mt Sinai) when the Lord said to me (Moses), "Assemble the people before Me and I will let them hear My words ... and they will teach them to their children." ' (Deuteronomy 4.9–10)

'Remember what [the tribe of] Amalek did to you on your way out of Egypt, how he met you on the way, cutting off those who were lagging behind, when you were tired and exhausted ... do not forget.' (Deuteronomy 25.17–19)

'Remember, and do not forget, how you provoked the Lord your God [concerning the Golden Calf] in the wilderness.' (Deuteronomy 9.7)

'Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the day when you came out of Egypt.' (Deuteronomy 24.9)

'Remember the Sabbath day to hallow it.' (Exodus 20.8)

Each serves as a daily life lesson. The redemption from Egypt is a reminder that no one has the right to enslave another and that all people are meant to be free. The revelation at Mount Sinai, when God pronounced the Ten Commandments, is the source of divine morality and our commitment to live by that code. The pernicious attack of the Amalekite tribe painfully recalls the human capacity for hateful cruelty. The story of the Golden Calf is a warning about worshipping idols of your own making. Miriam spoke badly of her brother Moses and was stricken with a disease which only ended when Moses pleaded to God on her behalf. This event prompts us to avoid disparaging others and not to abuse the awesome power of speech. Finally, the Sabbath is a reminder that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, teaching the need for a weekly cessation and respite from work.

Though all but one of the above quotations is taken from the book of Deuteronomy, most of them actually occurred earlier in the book of Exodus. Thus the deuteronomic referencing here serves to further highlight the memorial aspect of these historic experiences. Through these daily acts of remembrance we amalgamate the past into the present and so calibrate a moral compass to guide us in a purposeful future.

The six events all play central roles in Jewish philosophy and are discussed and conceptualised within numerous books by Jewish thinkers. For instance, the Exodus is analysed as a political revolution,² the Revelation as the birth of peoplehood,³ Amalek's assault as a recognition of the reality of hate,⁴ the Golden Calf as the innate human attraction to idolatry,⁵ Miriam's words as the importance of appropriate language,⁶ and the Sabbath as a palace in time.⁷ These memories thus serve to shape the beliefs and practices of traditional Jewish life.

These six can also be neatly divided into two sub-groups. Three of them teach positive lessons, namely

the values of freedom (Exodus), ethics (Sinai) and rest (Sabbath), while three provide negative warnings, namely the dangers of hate crimes (Amalek), idolisation (Calf) and slander (Miriam). If we represent the three positive lessons as the three corners of an upward-facing triangle, and the three warnings as the three corners of a downward-facing triangle, then the two triangles can be overlaid to produce a hexagram, the Star of David, which has been the symbol of the Jewish People for generations and is the centre-piece of the flag of the state of Israel. Thus the Star of David, which was thought to adorn the shield of King David, serves as a pointed reminder of the six memories.⁸

God's memory

As well as the injunction for *humans* to remember, God is also stirred to do so:

'And God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the animals that were with him in the Ark, and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters subsided.' (Genesis 8.1)

'And so it was when God destroyed the cities of the Plain [Sodom and Gomorrah] that God remembered Abraham; so He sent Lot from amidst the upheaval.' (Genesis 19.29)

'And God heard the cries of the Israelites and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' (Exodus 2.24)

'I [God] will remember My covenant with Jacob and My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember, and I will remember the Land.' (Leviticus 26.42)

How does a divine being remember, and by implication, forget? Surely forgetfulness is not an attribute of the all-knowing God? Maimonides explained that the biblical use of anthropomorphic idioms for God, extends not just to the human body, but to human feelings and thoughts too: 'What does the Torah mean by, "*Below God's feet*" (Exodus 24.10), "*God's finger*" (Exodus 31.18), "*God's hand*" (Exodus 9.3), etc.? All these expressions are to enable human understanding, which appreciates only corporeal imagery because, 'Torah is written in the language of Man' (Talmud, Berachot 31b) ... Similarly, God does not really sleep or wake, get angry or laugh, become happy or sad ... all such descriptions in the Bible are metaphors and imagery' (Maimonides, *Foundations of the Torah* 1.9–12).

Indeed, there is a pattern to God's memory in the Bible. The phrase is generally used when the actions of people prompt a divine response based on a pre-existing commitment. In each of the above four examples, there is a pact (*brit* in Hebrew) between God and specific people which creates obligations on both sides.

Before the Flood, God made a pact with Noah (Genesis 6.18) to save him, his family and the Ark of animals. In turn, Noah and his descendants were required to

NOTES

1. YH Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), p. 8.

2. M Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

3. J Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now: On Being Jewish: The Legacy of the World's Oldest Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), ch. 9.

4. I Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), ch. 7.

5. M Halbertal & A Margalit, *Idolatry* (tr N Goldblum; Cambridge MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1992).

6. J Telushkin, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well* (New York: William Morrow, 1998).

7. AJ Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975).

8. This is similar to F Rosenzweig's use of the points of the hexagram in, *The Star of Redemption* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), a key text in modern Jewish philosophy.

repopulate the Earth and not shed human blood (Genesis 9.1,6). God sent angels to save Lot (Abraham's nephew) from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah because God had already promised to make Abraham a great nation (Genesis 12.2) and expected him take moral responsibility for this commitment (Genesis 18.17–18). The redemption from Egypt was the fulfilment God's eternal promise to Abraham to be the God of his descendants and to give them a homeland (Genesis 17.7). The fourth quotation above comes after a long chapter in which the many punishments (exile, death and destruction, etc.) that will befall the Israelites if they are not faithful to their covenant with God are listed. However, this verse assures them that, nevertheless, God will ultimately make good on the covenant forged with their ancestors and bring them home to flourish again (Leviticus 26.44–45).

In each case, the idiom of God remembering is a result of a shared destiny between the Holy One and humankind. This reinforces the biblical idea that history has a clear purpose: it is the matrix in which the ongoing divine–human relationship is played out. God's commitment to the redemption of history also means that he will never let the Israelites forget their role, no matter how much they are persecuted: 'I [God] have said that I would scatter them and cause their memory to cease were it not for the anger of their enemy, and the misinterpretation of their tormentors' (Deuteronomy 32.26–27).

Thus memory in the Bible serves to prevent 'mission drift' from both God and humankind. Memory serves as the unbreakable bond between heaven and earth, ensuring that history will stay on course, no matter how long it takes.

How memorable is humankind?

A third usage of memory in the Bible adds another important dimension to this concept. King David wrote: 'When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You have set in place, [I wonder,] What is Man that You should remember him, and the son of mortal man that You should be mindful of him? Yet You have made him slightly less than the angels, and crowned him with soul and splendour' (Psalms 8.3–6).

We are a few billion bipeds on a tiny planet sitting along a spiral arm of just one of the millions of galaxies that make up the ever-expanding universe. What makes us worthy of God's interest and involvement? Why does God even notice us? The Talmud (tractate Shabbat, 88b–90a) relates to this issue through a fascinating story:

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: 'When Moses ascended on high [to Mount Sinai], the ministering angels said to the Holy One, blessed be God, "Sovereign of the universe, what business has one born of woman amongst us?" God answered, "He has come to receive the Torah." Said they, "But that is a secret treasure ... and You want to give it away to flesh and blood?! 'What is Man, that You

should remember him, and the son of man, that You are mindful of him?' " (Psalms 8.5).

'God turned to Moses and said, "Give them an answer." "Sovereign of the Universe," he replied, "I fear lest they consume me with the fiery breath of their mouths." Said God, "[Don't worry, just] hold on to the Throne of Glory and answer them."

'So Moses spoke up and said, "Sovereign of the Universe, the Torah which You are giving to me, what is written in it?" God said, "I am the Lord Your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt" (Exodus 20.2). Then Moses turned to the angels and said, "Did you go down to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why then should the Torah be yours?"

'Moses then asked God, "What else is written in it?" God said, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20.3). Moses again challenged the angels, "Do you live among peoples that engage in idol worship?"

'Moses continued, "Again what is written in it?" God, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20.8)." Moses to the angels, "Do you then do work, that you need to rest?"

'Moses, "Again what is written in it?" God, "Do not take My Name in vain" (Exodus 20.7). Moses to the angels, "Do you have any dealings amongst you that might give rise to an oath?"

'Moses, "Again what is written in it?" God, "Honour your father and your mother" (Exodus 20.12). Moses to the angels, "Do you even have a father and a mother?" ... so the angels conceded to God's plan.'

Angels might be close to God, but humankind too are valuable to God, not despite our limits and challenges, but because of them. Angels have no independence from God, their status defines them for eternity. But humankind are physical, exist *in* time, and are bestowed with free choice. This makes their actions worthy of God's concern. That we might choose to live by God's commandments makes us more precious to God than the loftiest angel. The depth of our divinely endowed consciousness is what memories are made of and thus is what makes us memorable to God.

Conclusion

Rather than venerating a mythic pre-history, with its many and capricious gods, the Bible broke away from other ancient cultures by insisting that the history of humankind was unfixed, redeemable and worthy of memorialising. Charged with six daily remembrances, as well as a plethora of rituals, recitations and festivals, the Jewish people have transmitted their history for millennia. God is also bound to this history through the covenants formed in the biblical era. Added to this, rabbinic Judaism saw the physical, down-to-earth nature of the Torah, and the complex nature of our consciousness, as the reason that humanity is worthy of God's memory, even more than the heavenly retinue. In the final analysis, we are our memories, and if we live by them then God will indeed remember us.