RABBI MEIR SOLOVEICHIK TIKVAH

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Ki Teitzei, Deuteronomy, Chapters 21-25

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Two Zakhors and the "Mind Attic" of Jewish History

"Remember me!" These are the words of Shakespeare's ghost, the father of Hamlet, the dead king in the bard's most famous play. Hamlet's father appears in spectral form to inform his son that he was murdered by Hamlet's uncle Claudius, who then married the king's wife, Hamlet's mother. "Remember me" are the words that drive the rest of the plot in the play. And this exhortation to remember is particularly relevant this week, when our *parashah* concludes with one of the most well-known biblical obligations of memory—one of the famous scriptural sentences starting with the word "*zakhor*," "remember":

> Remember what Amalek did to you on the road, when you left Egypt. (Deuteronomy 25:17)

"*Zakhor*" is, in a certain sense, a name for Judaism itself. As the historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi has written in a book of the same name:

> Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people.

While our reading is filled with more laws than any other *parashah*—rules relating to the political, cultic, civic, monetary, and military realms—it also contains obligations of memory, asking us to remember the Exodus, to remember God's defense of Moses to Miriam, and, finally, to remember Amalek's attack. The message is quite clear: it is memory that makes us a people, and memory is at the foundation of our faith.

In understanding this, let us look at Hamlet's response to the ghost's exhortation. Asked to remember his father's murder, Hamlet responds that he will indeed remember it; in fact, that is, from now on, all he will remember. He says as follows:

> Remember thee!
> Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
> In this distracted globe. Remember thee!
> Yea, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past

> That youth and observation copied there,
> And thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain,
> Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!

What does he mean by memory holding a seat "in this distracted globe"? As Marjorie Garber notes in her excellent book on Shakespeare, the word "globe" here has several meanings, but first and foremost it refers to one's head, to one's mind. And if we look carefully at this passage we see that Hamlet describes memory as a way of organizing the mind. Hamlet declares that he will focus only on this memory of his father, whereas originally he had so much more in his mind. Now, he will focus only on the ghost's instruction of *zakhor*, and forget all he read, and played, and saw. He will "wipe away all trivial fond records/ All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past/ That youth and observation copied there . . ."

Hamlet is saying that we choose what we remember; we can't remember everything, and what we choose to remember then guides us. Later in *Hamlet*, as Garber notes, in the famous "play within a play," there is a wonderful description of how memory forms us, guides us. The actor says:

> Purpose is but the slave to memory,
> Of violent birth, but poor validity,
> Which now, like fruit unripe, sticks on the tree,
> But fall, unshaken, when they mellow be.

The actor is saying that memory drives our purpose; but when our memory mellows, then it no longer dictates our actions. This is meant to be a critique of Hamlet's mother, married to Claudius immediately after the king's death. She has allowed her memory of her husband to mellow, whereas Hamlet has done the opposite: Hamlet has chosen to forget everything that is not about his father; he has organized his entire mind around the ghost. Our minds are an organized form of memory.

Hamlet's understanding of remembrance is paralleled in a passage in Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* series, where Watson discovers that Holmes has no idea whether the earth revolves around the sun. Doyle describes Holmes's reply:

> "You appear to be astonished," he said, smiling at my expression of surprise. "Now that I do know it I shall do my best to forget it."
>
> "To forget it!"
>
> "You see," he explained, "I consider that a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across, so that the knowledge which might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things so that he has a difficulty in laying his hands upon it. Now the skillful workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in

> doing his work, but of these he has a large assortment, and all in the most perfect order. It is a mistake to think that that little room has elastic walls and can distend to any extent. Depend upon it there comes a time when for every addition of knowledge you forget something that you knew before. It is of the highest importance, therefore, not to have useless facts elbowing out the useful ones."
>
> "But the Solar System!" I protested.
>
> "What the deuce is it to me?" he interrupted impatiently; "you say that we go round the sun. If we went round the moon it would not make a pennyworth of difference to me or to my work."

Jews are never commanded to remember everything; in fact, precisely because we choose what to remember, the obligation of memory becomes all the more important.

The point of the metaphor of the "mind attic," as the theologian Gilbert Meilaender explains, is that what we choose to assemble in our "mind attic," what we choose to remember and what we choose to forget, forms the heart of the way we organize our lives. And just as Holmes chooses to retain the memory of certain things and forget others, so too the Jews are never commanded to remember everything; in fact, precisely because we choose what to remember, the obligation of memory becomes all the more important.

We remember the salvational aspects of our history, but as our *parashah* famously informs us, we remember searing, painful experiences as well. We are obligated to remember evil enemies who sought to murder the helpless and defenseless. Thus the exhortation to remember Amalek continues, telling us to remember

> How he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and cut off at your rear all who lagged behind you; and he did not fear God. (Deuteronomy 25:18)

These exhortations are necessary, because we may instinctively seek to forget particularly painful memories. In a brilliant excursus on the Book of Esther, the commentator known as Malbim (Meir Leybush Wisser, Russia 1809–1897) takes note of the fact that immediately after Mordecai the Jew saves the king of Persia from assassination, the king responds not by rewarding his savior, but by elevating a Jew-hater. It is only after he grows wary of Haman, and wonders whom he can trust, that the king peruses the "*sefer ha-zikhronot*," "the book of memories," and rediscovers the debt he owes. A theme of the book, for Malbim, is the king's ethical failures regarding memory. In this, the monarch is akin to the "lord of the drinks" in Genesis who served Pharaoh and found himself in prison with Joseph. After Joseph interpreted the minister's dream in a positive way—and presciently, prophetically, predicted his release and return to his station—Joseph beseeched his fellow prisoner to remember him, and yet,

> The lord of drinks did not remember Joseph, but he forgot him. (Genesis 40:23)

We can understand why the drink-minister of Egypt did not remember Joseph. It is unpleasant to be in prison, and it is even more unpleasant to be placed in prison because you displeased a pharaoh. Memories that are unpleasant are those we wish to forget.

And at times, when we don't forget them, unpleasant memories can affect us in unpleasant ways. For Hamlet, the unpleasant memory of his father's murder eventually consumes him, so that ultimately his outlook on life becomes utterly bleak. Marjorie Garber further points out that Friedrich Nietzsche was surely referring to Hamlet when he wrote that we must lose our memories of the past "if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present."

But that, of course, is not the Jewish approach; we remember God's miracles, and we remember what was wrought by our enemies. And though we remember painful moments, these memories have not destroyed us; quite the contrary. Gilbert Meilaender, citing Holmes's metaphor of the "mind attic," notes that in the Bible, Israel is obligated to remember unpleasant things. He reflects:

> "Remember," the ancient Israelites are commanded by their Lord, "remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you." Even the memory of their bondage is not to be erased, but, rather, drawn into a story that, by God's power and grace, is transformed into one of redemption. . . . Human beings, at any rate, are not to erase the memories that give them pain but to place those memories into a new, larger, and redemptive story.

The memory of evil goes hand in hand with the memory of Providence; the former has never undone the latter.

It is with this in mind that we can ponder the two most famous exhortations in the Bible involving the word *zakhor*. There is first, of course, the commandment that we fulfill every seventh day of the week:

> *Zakhor et yom ha-shabbat l'kad'sho*.
> Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. (Exodus 20:8)

Through this commandment, we constantly reaffirm our faith in all that the Sabbath recalls: God's creation of the world, His Providence, and His providential plan for what He has brought into being. But then there is the other *zakhor*, of this *parashah*:

> Remember what Amalek did to you . . . (Deuteronomy 25:17)

Two *zakhor*s: it may seem strange to combine these two forms of memory, memory of Amalek and the memory of a providential God Who created Heaven and Earth, and Who placed the Jewish people at the heart of His sacred plan. But the truth is that precisely because we unite these two *zakhor*s the memory of evil does not consume us or destroy us, like it did Hamlet. To paraphrase Sherlock Holmes, these two *zakhor*s are the

organizing principles of the attic of the Jewish mind. The experience of our enemies, and our memory of it, has never undone our embrace of the positive *zakhor* of Providence. On the contrary, as the writer Yossi Klein Halevi once put it, in words even more relevant in the week we mark 9/11

> I ask myself what it is about this strange little people that continually finds itself at the center of international attention, repeatedly on the front lines against totalitarian forces of evil—Nazism, Soviet Communism, now jihadism—all of which marked the Jews as their primary obstacle to achieving world domination. At those moments, I feel gratitude for having found my place in this story.

The memory of evil goes hand in hand with the memory of Providence; the former has never undone the latter. And the miracles of Jewish history, past and present, have vindicated our faith in the face of our many memories of evil.

We are now approaching Rosh Hashanah, whose liturgical name is "*Yom ha-Zikaron*," the "Day of Remembering." This is a year when our memory of months past will be very raw. We will indeed remember the horrific evil done. But we will also remember the heroism, the bravery, and the faith that we have witnessed. It is to this that the exhortation "*zakhor*" also applies; and it is refusal to forget this heroism that will strengthen, and renew, our hope and our faith in the year to come.

Additional Resources

Gilbert Meilaender on Memory, "Why Remember?" *First Things*, August 2003. Click here to read.

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