

**Three Ways Our Memories Can Fail Us:
And What To Do About It
Kol Nidre, 5762 (2001)
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One of the more cerebral of *mitzvot* -- one that we are particularly called upon to perform on the High Holidays -- is the *mitzvah* to remember. Throughout the year, we are commanded to remember the Exodus, to remember the Sabbath Day, ... to remember what Amalek did to us. We're told, in the *parashah* that we will read this coming Shabbat, "*Z'chor yimot olam*-Remember the past!" (Deuteronomy 32:7). On the High Holidays, we focus more on ourselves. We are called upon to recall our behavior during the past year. It sounds simple. And yet, it isn't always easy to remember. In fact, it seems all too human to forget.

There's a midrash, a rabbinic story, that tells us that, at the end of the sixth day of creation, when God was just about finished creating the world and was about to rest, God suddenly realized that he had forgotten to include within it something that, upon reflection, He realized it couldn't do without. God had forgotten to include, in his plan for the world, *shikh'chah*-to power to forget. So He called back the world, instilled it with *shikh'chah*, forgetfulness, and then He was satisfied that it was ready for human beings to dwell within it.

Some of us are probably wishing that God hadn't remembered to create forgetfulness! After all, just about everyone complains about memory problems these days. I am sure that most of us, at one time or another, have forgotten people's names, or misplaced something or confused details. The definition of "senior" must be changing, for some awfully young people are having "senior moments."

This past summer, I happened to hear a review on NPR of a newly published book by Daniel L. Schacter, the chair of the Department of Psychology at Harvard University, entitled, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*. When I heard the review, I thought to myself: What a perfect book to



read to prepare for the High Holidays! It has "sin" and "memory"-two critical themes of the High Holidays-in the title!

It's a very interesting book. It describes all sorts of interesting memory lapses and why we have them. I was a little disappointed at first, though, because in fact, the memory failings the author describes are not really sins at all. There's nothing immoral, for example, about failing to remember the name of a person whom you happen to run into on a downtown street-unless, of course, it's your husband or wife. There's nothing morally problematic about what's called "transience"-gradually finding it difficult to remember things that used to come naturally.

In fact, none of the imperfections of memory, in and of themselves, are sins. On the contrary, Schacter demonstrates that memory imperfections are adaptive-that is, we couldn't function without them. There's just not enough room in our brains to remember equally well everything that has ever happened to us-and there's less room, the older we get. And there is no way we could concentrate equally well on four or five things happening at once. It's a sign of the efficient, well-adjusted and healthy brain to prioritize our processing of information, and to prioritize what we need to remember. In certain ways, we need our memories to be imperfect, as surely as, in general, we need them to be faithful and reliable. In other words, God was right!

On the other hand, several of the imperfections of memory Schacter describes in his book are actually deeply connected to the moral category we call sin and it is those I'd like to discuss with you. Jewish tradition sees each of us as possessing two competing inclinations: a *yetzer tov*--an inclination to do good, and a *yetzer ha-ra*--an inclination to do evil. Memory's imperfections can be tools in the hands of our *yetzer ha-ra*. Nonetheless, by being aware of that possibility, there are certainly ways for our *yetzer tov*, that side of us that wishes to strive for the good, to address the challenge.

Who is the world's most famous living cellist? Yo Yo Ma, of course. On October 15, 1999, Yo Yo Ma performed at Carnegie Hall. The next day, according to the New York Times, he gave an even more "dramatic and nail-biting performance." How so? On his way across town, he left his cello in the trunk of a New York City taxicab. Not to worry: with the help of New York City's finest, the cello was recovered less than four hours later, and Yo Yo Ma played it that very evening at a

concert in Brooklyn.

Now, on the one hand, we can ask, "How can you forget your cello in the trunk of a taxi? I'd never do that!" After all, a cello is pretty big. And, particularly in the case of Yo Yo Ma's cello, it's pretty valuable: his is valued at \$2.5 million. And in the case of a professional musician like Yo Yo Ma, there's not much work he can do without it!

But the fact is, it's quite easy to be absent-minded. We are bombarded with so many stimuli, it's a wonder we are not more distracted. The other day, I was feverishly looking for my Judaic Classics CD, a disk that contains the Bible and the Talmud and several dozen other classical Jewish texts, to confirm a source for this very sermon. I looked all over for it and couldn't find it-until I thought to check in my computer's CD Rom disk drive. There it was! Absent-mindedness can happen to any of us. If you or I can forget where we placed our house keys, Yo Yo Ma can forget where he placed his cello!

But how is this a concern on the High Holidays? What is wrong with being absent-minded?

Well, what about those promises we made last Yom Kippur? Whatever happened to that seriousness of purpose, that commitment to do things differently? There's a prayer in our *mahzor* that refers to this propensity to forget our promises so easily:

All the vows on our lips,
The burdens in our hearts,
The pent-up regrets about
Which we brooded and spoke
Through prayers without end
On last Atonement Day
From mountain peaks of fervor
We fell to common ways
At the close of the fast.

In moments of weakness
We do not remember
The promises we made last Yom Kippur.

Recall that we easily forget
Take only our heart's intent.
Forgive us, pardon us.

What happened to us? How could we forget so easily? Yet we did. And now the year is behind us.

There's another way in which absentmindedness can be harmful. A New Yorker cartoon by Robert Mankoff that appeared about a year and a half ago shows a couple sitting in their living room. He's on the easy chair and she's on the couch. They're looking at each other and she says, "I'm sorry, dear. I wasn't listening. Could you please repeat everything you've said since we've been married."

As annoying as it can be to temporarily misplace your wallet or your glasses, they can always be replaced. Losing them is hardly a moral failing. And even a cello can be replaced. But what about a relationship? Can it be replaced, like a set of keys? When we're talking to someone, it is so easy to tune out! It is so easy to be in our own world! But it is awfully distancing.

If there's a "sin" akin to absent-mindedness, it's not the failure to remember where we put our belongings, it's the failure to fully belong, it's the failure to relate, with empathy and caring, to the one with whom we are in a relationship.

If the moral equivalent of absent-mindedness is a sin, then mindfulness in the face of distraction is its corresponding virtue.

On the first day of Rosh HaShanah we read about Hagar and Ishmael wandering in the wilderness. All their water was gone. And we read that Hagar placed Ishmael under one of the bushes, and there he sat, all alone. And then the text tells us, that God listened to the voice of the child where he was: "*vayishma elokim et kol hana'ar ... ba'asher hu sham.*" Those last few words seem superfluous. If the text wanted to tell us that God heard the voice of the child, it could simply have told us that. Why does it go on and say that God heard the voice of the child ba'asher hu sham-"where he was?"

A midrash tells us that the answer is, to teach us a lesson. When we're listening to people, we have to listen to them the way God listened to Ishmael. We have to hear where they are coming from. How often do we really listen to people where they are at? How often do we really stop and connect?

It's not very easy to listen to people where they are at. If someone we know is

going through a hard time, it can be very difficult or depressing for us to listen closely to what he or she has to say. Most of the time, we're just too distracted, anyway. How can we possibly absorb, say, what a child is trying to tell us, if he or she is sitting next to us as we're driving the car, listening to the radio and talking on the cell phone at the same time?

Nevertheless, our obligation is to focus. Distractions are always around us. It's always easy to lose our focus. But we should try throughout the coming year to remember the promises we make today. And we should strive to stop and listen-to our loved ones, our friends, our co-workers: to every other human being with whom we come in contact-where they are at.

There is another kind of memory imperfection that Professor Schachter talks about in his book that is worth reflecting on, and that is our tendency, when we remember our own role in the past, to distort, usually in our own favor. Professor Schachter calls this an "egocentric bias."

Individuals ... often hold unrealistically flattering opinions of their abilities and achievements. [P]eople are more likely to attribute successes than failures to themselves, and to attribute failures to forces outside the self.

It is hard, and sometimes painful, to remember negative things about ourselves. We can't imagine that we ever could have hurt someone's feelings-at least not intentionally. So we habitually remember what happened differently from the way it actually did. Isn't it the easiest thing in the world, after someone is annoyed at us, to remember that it must have been their fault? It must have been they who were hypersensitive, rather than we who were cruel?

We tend to construct a picture of ourselves that lets us off the hook.

In this case, it isn't really our memory that is playing tricks on us: it is we who are playing tricks with our memories-using our minds to pacify ourselves and to avoid doing the work we must do during this season of the year.

The Spanish Jewish philosopher and preacher, Joseph Albo, wrote a famous book by the name of *Sefer Halkkarim*, The Book of Philosophical Principles, in which he writes about the obstacles to repentance:

The first hindrance to repentance is ignorance of having committed a sin. A sick person cannot be cured as long as he does not feel or know he is sick, for he will not seek the cure. If a person does not recognize or know that he has sinned, he will never regret doing the things he does, nor will he repent.

Knowing that we have a tendency to distort our recollections is a good thing. For once we know it exists, we can overcome it. We can, if we choose to, peek around those distortions and look at ourselves honestly, and do the work that Yom Kippur is designed to inspire us to do: teshuvah.

It's not easy to do teshuvah, and this first step, namely, remembering the past honestly, is perhaps the hardest.

Yom Kippur can help. Think of the experience of reciting the Ashamnu. Just a few moments ago, we stood up together, and together recited that long list of sins. That prayer puts into our mouths the words that need to be there. Not the excuses that we generally use to respond to criticism, but words that forthrightly and forcefully admit that we might be wrong.

Once we've started to go beyond our distorted recollections and remember ourselves honestly, the rest can follow rather smoothly. We can confess, apologize, and seek the forgiveness of those whom we've harmed. We can offer to compensate them and resolve never to make the same mistakes ever again. "Reality testing" our self-serving memories can allow us to grow and then to show, through our behavior, that we've really changed.

Finally, there's a memory problem that doesn't involve too much forgetting, but rather too much remembering. Schachter calls this persistence. Persistence is when you can't stop thinking about something you want to push to the side. Sometimes, it's as simple and as harmless as a melody that you can't get out of your head. You're trying to write a letter, and all you can do is hum this tune that can't seem to disappear. Sometimes it's a humiliating or hurtful experience, that you simply can't stop thinking about.

Persistence can be a burden on us. As Rabbi Sidney Greenberg has written: All of us during the past year have suffered wrongs and [all of us have] inflicted them. Too often we recall the instances when we were offended; we forget those where we were the offenders. Were it not wiser to reverse our memory systems- consign the wrong suffered to oblivion-and repair, where time yet permits, the wrong inflicted?

All too often we remember with bitterness the unfulfilled promises made to us, but we calmly forget the pledge we made and did not honor, the resolve we made and did not keep, the word we gave and did not fulfill. Were it not better that we forgot the first and remember the second?

We can try to overcome persistence when our better judgment urges us to do so. As we think about entering a new year, we can decide what injuries to the ego we're going to carry over into the new year, and which ones we're going to forget. Judaism encourages us to overcome persistence in yet another way.

There are many jokes that suggest that Judaism encourages us to feel guilt. There is some truth to that. But the Torah doesn't want us to wallow in guilt. One might think that repeating, again and again, our sins on Yom Kippur falls into the category of persistence. But it doesn't.

Judaism encourages us to feel guilty when we make mistakes, in order to nudge us to apologize and to try to behave differently in the future. The point of the process, though, is to move beyond guilt. Once we've done teshuvah-completely and wholeheartedly-we can and should feel cleansed from our guilt-and it should no longer plague us.

He may not have known it at the time, but William Durant, the founder of General Motors, once gave a great teaching that applies to those who've done teshuvah: "Forget past mistakes. Forget failures. Forget everything except what you're going to do right now and do it."

We do have some control over our memory. Much more than we think.

As we enter a new year, let's think carefully about what we wish to carry forward into the new year and what we wish to leave behind. In the words of Rabbi Sidney Greenberg, "Let's try to remember those things which, if forgotten, would suppress our nobler instincts, and let's try to forget those things which, if remembered, would bring out our unworthy traits."

Let's try to remember that.

Amen.