

## ***Yameinu: Remembrance is the Secret of Redemption***

**Kol Nidre 5780 ~ 2019**

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For the last 18 years on September 11, I find ways to tell or write the story of my morning as a New York City rabbi before the world changed. I have added details over time to share more color, those that I forgot, and those I chose not to recall, but each year I begin with the words, *I remember*.

This exercise has been one of cultivating my memories in order not to forget them of course, but also, so that the day itself and those that followed have meaning beyond the date on the calendar.

Renewing those days, *yameinu* – isn't an exercise in magical thinking about today. If I really want to feel a sense of renewal out of tragedy, I need only look at our eldest daughter, with whom I was pregnant at the time, and remember when she was my internal light against the external darkness of that day.

We are a people of memory. It is deliberate, sometimes selective, literary, constructed, and oriented towards the lessons we want to take from the past and apply them in the present or the future.

On Rosh Hashana, we focused on *hadesh* – the act of renewing that emerges when we want to carry our experiences forward for meaning and relevance.

Tonight, my focus is on *yameinu* – our days – and the very real quest to assess *which days* we must call forth on *this* day, and for what purpose? After the year that has come to a close, a year that actually hurt to experience in many ways; We are to press pause on our lives so that we can look at the hard edges and see from where the renewal and healing might come.

As my friend and colleague Rabbi Sharon Brous noted, we've ridden the wave from shock to fury to frustration and bewilderment and back again, and that was just this past week.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ikar-la.org/sermons/building-a-new-america/>

And yet, as the great sage Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai once offered when wrestling with whether or not to speak publicly about a particularly fraught communal issue:

אם לי אוי אומר לא אם לי אוי אומר  
*Woe unto me if I speak, and woe unto me if I stay silent.*<sup>2</sup>

He chose to speak, and I will too.

The *yameinu* I am thinking about have not been unfamiliar to our collective memory. The Torah instructs us 169 times, more than any other mitzvah, to remember – and the list is long:

To remember Shabbat, even though there isn't any scientific proof that the culmination of the creation of the world happened on the seventh day.

To remember Amalek the ancient ancestor of all those who have sought the destruction of the Jewish people.

To remember that we were slaves in Egypt, despite no empirical evidence, we are nonetheless commanded, *b'chol dor vador – hayav adam lirot et atzmo keilu hu yatza mimitzrayim*: to recall our slavery and relive our liberation as if we ourselves had been there.

To remember the destruction of the sacred center of our people on Tisha B'Av, as well as so many later defeats by our enemies. Jeremiah's first-hand testimony, transcribed in the Book Of Lamentations, from which our verse *hadesh yameinu kekedem* originated, inspires us to mourn the suffering by fasting, by sitting on the ground and avoiding physical comforts.

And of course, after the horrors of the Holocaust, we are to remember the dead and in their honor, to stand against orchestrated, systemic persecution that has echoes of what they endured.

History and memory, knowledge and meaning, are meant to impel us towards a life of purpose, and as a community we are to see every generation as an opportunity to embody our past for ourselves and for others.

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<sup>2</sup> BT Bava Batra 89b

We eat, sing, and narrate our memories and they command a response: free the enslaved, relieve the suffering, and embrace the stranger, lest from this we learn nothing.

In his remarkable book, *Everything is Illuminated*, Jonathan Safran Foer writes: “Jews have 6 senses – touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing and memory...for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger.

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 knifepoint to be sure that 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?*

In the last year, as we have borne witness to anti-Semitism and white nationalist violence in Pittsburgh, Poway, the streets of Brooklyn, and communities all over the country, and the globe, our *pinpricks*, our memories, our internalized fears that have laid dormant for so many, for so long, have felt immediate and acute.

We have also borne witness to the ongoing migrant/refugee crisis at the border, the demonizing of asylum seekers, the incitement of rhetoric against minorities, the slashing of the American Refugees Program<sup>3</sup> and the diminishing of America as the haven that sheltered so many of our own relatives only 2-3 generations ago.

The Jewish community has found itself on the horns of a dilemma: can the memories of our past fuel our care for others in the present, or are they so sacrosanct that to use them as reminders desecrates their memory?

“Never again” after the Holocaust certainly meant that Jews should never be rounded up and slaughtered, but if we don’t understand that it also meant “never again for anyone,” have we learned anything at all?

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/us/politics/trump-refugees.html>

If the role of history is to record and chronicle the past, the role of memory is to recall the past in such a way as to learn from it about living in the present and aspiring towards a better future – for ourselves and for others. These two tasks require different tools, and speak different languages, so, as we focus on *our days*, I am drawn to ask, when does memory serve the task of reconciliation and renewal, and when is memory an imperative to transform the future?

We would be naive to think that history is ever objective. Historians, philosophers, and psychologists have remarked that history is what we choose to remember about the past, shaped by the particular way in which we remember it. Memory in Judaism is about cultivating and strengthening Jewish identity. Memory is an active pursuit, it's never simply the rehashing of long-ago events. Selected sacred myths are retold using liturgy and ritual, meant to create a sense of belonging for us storytellers and listeners, as well as a direct line to our current lives.

But retelling our mythic past is more than just narrative consciousness-raising; it becomes the source of obligation, making real moral, spiritual and communal claims upon us in our efforts to build a strong, vital future.

As my colleague, Rabbi Adina Lewittes has taught, “We recommit to building sanctuaries of love and justice to balance the darkness. Through the work of memory. Judaism takes our legendary past and makes it a purposeful, unifying platform on which to stabilize the present and launch a coherent vision for the future, neither living in longed-for yesterdays, nor wandering aimlessly in search of tomorrows.”<sup>4</sup>

On this Kol Nidre night, it is essential that we remember who we are. It is vital to reach back to *yameinu* – our days – and let those experiences help us to shape these holy days, and what comes next.

The resurgence of racism, antisemitism, and anti-immigrant rhetoric in this country is a frightening, vexing phenomenon. No explanation for hate-filled,

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<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Adina Lewittes: <http://shaarcommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/RH1-2017-Un-Remembering-1.pdf>

dog-whistle sentiments could justify the threats they pose, and the results they deliver.

America is a country of immigrants in which, other than the indigenous, native peoples, *no person or group has a longer history*, and yet anti-immigrant fervor remains a sweeping phenomenon in American society.

Many of our ancestors arrived at these shores greeted with the same language of “other” that the migrants of today from ravaged Central America and Mexico received. They were accused of carrying disease and called criminals. Their loyalty to their new country was questioned and found wanting. They were discriminated against in employment and in housing. They were blocked at the ports, ships were returned to war torn Europe, children were separated from their parents, without a clear way back together. We too - a traumatized people seeking safety in the US, entered into a society with racism and oppression of minorities built into the bedrock of the country.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in his 1938 essay, *The Meaning of this Hour* “Either we make the world an altar for God, or it is invaded by demons. There can be no neutrality. Either we are ministers of the sacred or slaves of evil.”

If Rosh Hashanah was all about aspiration and inspiration, then tonight we begin the holiday of agitation. To be able to sit with discomfort, to embrace it and learn from it, is a spiritual practice. As such, real spiritual practice asks us to look at ourselves, our community, and country, and not be satisfied. It asks us to acknowledge that we have engaged, individually and collectively, in sins of both omission and commission. Sometimes we transgress not because of what we have done, but because of what we have failed to do.

The late Eli Wiesel, envisioned the post-Shoah (Holocaust) slogan “Never Again” in this way: “Never again” becomes more than a slogan: It's a prayer, a promise, and a vow.”<sup>5</sup> On this night of vows, we can appreciate that this slogan was meant, in Wiesel’s understanding, as a commitment to vigilance and to speaking out against atrocities that are committed in our own day and age. We must understand that *hadesh yameinu* means – renew our days with the understanding that *never again is now*.

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<sup>5</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Hostage*, 2012 p. 77

As the immigration crisis has unfolded, I have heard Jews question our obligation to these refugees because of the silence heard round the world after WWII, and the scapegoating of Jews as the cause of all problems. While I can understand the sentiment, when I hear such things, I worry deeply that for too many in our community, our narrative of being the receiving end of history's abuse has hardened our own hearts as Pharaoh's once was; that it has made us so relieved to finally be in a position of comfort, that we excuse modern day Pharaohs and pretend we are not communally responsible for one another.

In the aftermath of the Pittsburgh massacre the shooter claimed he was attacking the synagogue because of its work with HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society that has been providing humanitarian aid and assistance to refugees since 1881, when the Jewish community were the refugees and immigrants. Our synagogue community, like all places of worship are designed to be welcoming havens where people can connect with their family, friends, community and G-d, welcome visitors and guests, and be free from fear and violence.

That premise was taken from us once again as a collective Jewish community as a terrorist in Pittsburgh and in Poway 6 months later, used guns to ruthlessly rip away life from people congregating and celebrating and remembering within their sanctuary.

The incitement of ugly rhetoric and religious, racial and political divisiveness isn't new. We have seen this before. We know that *our days* may not look exactly like those in our collective past, but we are only as safe as the most vulnerable in society and today, and while the Pittsburgh and Poway gunmen came for Jews, we were only the latest community to be targeted along with so many people of faith who have been gunned down at bible study, in church, in a mosque, and a Sikh temple.

It is painful to consider that we live in a time when we might have to temper our loving welcome of strangers as we protect our communities from violence and hate, but we must not give in to the hatred and divisiveness we are witnessing from so many.

Yehuda Kurtzer, President of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America offers a vision for reclaiming the use of memory -- ancient and contemporary –

as a strategy for reinvigorating Jewish identity. In his masterful book *Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past*, he suggests that if we can change how we think about our past, maybe it will change who we are today.

This is another way of understanding *hadesh yameinu*. In the 21st century, with the tools and information we've gained, we must use the approaches of both history and memory, knowledge and meaning. "...[H]istory, applied correctly," he notes, "is an ethical tool by which we use our consciousness of what has preceded us to make better and more informed choices for the future."

Remembrance demands honesty and integrity. In the same vein, we also cannot over mythologize the past, reducing the complex, multi-valent Jewish story into some flat and shallow tale of woe. Kurtzer offers that we must be comfortable knowing that every time we recall a memory as history, it may mean something a little different than it meant before. We use our memories and our history to ignite identity and community, and it is true that every time we might be called to invoke the past, we might get caught in the vortex between what is sacrosanct and what is motivation to work for the betterment of the world.

The most recent example of this came this summer when the Holocaust was at the center of political discourse. After migrant detention camps were likened to and called concentration camps, many mainstream Jewish and Christian groups blasted the analogy.

But by definition, my friends, analogies are imperfect. They are meant to compare things for the purpose of explanation and clarification. As my friend and colleague Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg wrote in the Washington Post: "We already know that the path to atrocity can be a process and that the Holocaust didn't begin with gas chambers, it began with dehumanizing propaganda, with discriminatory laws, with roundups and deportations, and with internment. Those things are happening in our country now."<sup>6</sup>

I will support anyone's right to disagree with language used, as long as there is an equal or greater expression of righteous indignation about what is happening in

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/19/never-again-means-nothing-if-holocaust-analogies-are-always-off-limits/>

*our day, now*. If we are more angered by *the words* being used to describe the conditions in detention centers then the *conditions* that prompt those descriptions, we have learned nothing.

The argument over whether or not these facilities amount to concentration camps is almost beside the point. As Adam Serwer wrote this summer in *The Atlantic*, “The semantic dispute obscures the true conflict, over whether the treatment of migrants in America amounts to a historic crime, whether future generations will wonder how those involved could possibly have gone along with it, whether there will one day be memorials erected to commemorate it, whether historians write solemn books about it, whether those looking back will vow never to repeat it.”<sup>7</sup>

Will we say to our children that we didn’t know what was happening at the Otay Mesa detention center the way residents in the town of Dachau said they didn’t know what was happening in the concentration camp 45 minutes away that bore the same name?

We, who are commanded “*zachor – lo tishkach*”- remember, don’t forget, is etched into our consciousness as Jews. We build memorials and museums for our dead to ritualize our remembering, yet we forget that we are living in a moment that will be memorialized and our own forgetting will be put on display. *Hadesh yameinu* – we must remember that *never again* starts with not forgetting, but it doesn’t end until we actually remember. Remember that words create and destroy worlds. Remember that vigilance and voice are powerful tools. Remember that the rabbis also said: *Lo alecha ha’melacha ligmor, v’lo ata ben horin l’hibatel mimenah*<sup>8</sup> you are not required to finish the work, nor are you allowed to turn away from it.

Recalling the terrible lessons of our past does not disgrace the memory of that atrocity, nor does it harm the victims of it decades later. Quite the opposite: *hadesh yameinu* means that one of the best ways to honor the memory of those murdered because they were Jews is to take profoundly to heart the Jewish community’s long-held mantra: *never again means never again for anyone, and never again is now*.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/07/border-facilities/593239/>

<sup>8</sup> Pirke Avot 2:21

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism is widely accredited with the teaching that “remembrance is the secret of redemption.” As we renew *our days*, let the memories of our collective past not gather dust in the annals of history, but may they inspire and motivate us today, and all of the *yameinu* yet to come, to build and be built by that which has come before, in the service of the world yet to be.

*Hatima tova* – may our collective teshuva inspire the redemption we seek.