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A Time to Remember

“Without memory, our existence would be barren and opaque, like a prison cell into which no light penetrates; like a tomb which rejects the living. If anything can, it is memory that will save humanity.”¹

These words, spoken by Professor Elie Wiesel, *zecher tzaddik livrachah*, in his 1986 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, could be an anthem of Rosh Hashanah.

The Jewish New Year is known by many names, among them Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Remembrance. Today of all days is a time to remember.

Memory in Judaism is not passive; it's more than an accumulation of facts. Instead, memory entails examining the deeds of the past, drawing from them moral truths that inspire us to sacred living, and incorporating those lessons into our beliefs and behaviors. In the words of Elie Wiesel, “Information must be transformed into knowledge, knowledge into sensitivity and sensitivity into commitment.”²

This applies not only in our personal lives but in our national lives as well. The shofar, the primary symbol of memory on Rosh Hashanah, was originally a rallying call for the entire people. Whether mustering troops for battle, announcing a religious festival, or inaugurating the jubilee year, the shofar was a tool used to move and motivate us as a community. This year, as it does every four years, the shofar appeals to our Jewish memory in service of our American citizenship as we consider how we can weave our beautifully intertwined religious and civic traditions into a banner that signals the aspirations our nation.

This unusually vitriolic Presidential campaign has challenged America to articulate a vision for our future with two very different agendas on the table. Some have gone so far as to say that the soul of the nation is at stake. Others have asked how we could have arrived at such troubling times. As Jews, we have always respected the weight of the past, and in turning to the study of history today, I believe we can inform our response to the essential questions before us.

Earlier this summer, before either major Presidential candidate secured their party's nomination, I took advantage of a few quiet weeks around the office to conduct a personal research project. I approached scholars of American history with the

¹ https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-acceptance_en.html

² <http://www.npr.org/2008/04/07/89357808/a-god-who-remembers>

challenge of helping me understand America's past in order to guide my thinking about America's future. I asked them: are there values that are essentially American that can help shape a vision for our nation's future? Or in other words, if we want to be true to ourselves as Americans, are there fundamental principles that should guide us?

On the one hand, the historians I spoke with predominantly agreed that the answer is no. There are no values that are principally American or un-American. We've never been one thing, neither great nor terrible but a mixture of both. We judge as wrong sins of the past such as displacement of American Indians and disenfranchisement of women – but just because they are wrong does not mean they are not American. As David Roediger, professor of American Studies at the University of Kansas, phrased it:

The inspired and the brutal in [America's] past are not one set of things over here and another over there. They are almost always connected. [For example], the puritans' city-on-the-hill aspirations ... inspired openness and moral sensibilities [but] also underwrote manifest destiny. ... [And] Kansas was at once a beacon of freedom in the 1850s [while also displacing] Indians aggressively in the cause of that goal.³

From a historical standpoint, our moral successes and failures are intertwined, each adding to the overall picture of what it means to be American.

Of course, in academia as in Judaism, there is always another opinion. Brian Balogh, Professor of History at the University of Virginia, agrees that all of our social policies and popular movements – whether moral or immoral – must be understood as American. Even so, he nevertheless believes that there is one principle of American history that remains constant throughout the ages: We are a nation formed around a noble idea. America is not based on borders or ancestry but rather on philosophical ideals that inspire loyalty and common cause among their adherents. This makes America unique among the nations, and it provides a starting point for generating a communal memory that might help us make national *teshuvah* at this season.

On the 17th of Tammuz 5536, otherwise known as the 4th of July 1776, the Declaration of Independence announced that “all men are created equal.” Strange as it may seem, that was the first time in history that anyone had ever bothered to write that down.⁴ Indeed, it was *because* this idea was absent from other governments that the fledgling United States declared itself independent. As the Constitution would later attest, America was built to be an experiment in democracy, an attempt to harness humankind's highest ideals and aspirations “in order to form a more perfect union.”

³ Personal correspondence. July 23, 2016.

⁴ *The West Wing* “What Kind of Day Has It Been” (2000) written by Aaron Sorkin. Aaron Sorkin also states, “That was the first time anybody had bothered to write that down” ([here](#)).

Yet even as it was written and signed, the framers knew that this was an ideal to *work for* rather than one they had *already achieved*. In the 18th century, “all men” was a fairly limited group; but it was never supposed to stay that way. The ensuing centuries have borne witness to the steady expansion of who is considered equal under the law, which has grown to protect people of varying classes, colors, genders, and abilities. This has all been part of the plan set forth on that hot summer day in Philadelphia.

This, according to Professor Balogh, is “what unites us.”⁵ Americans have always argued over the limits and extents of equality and the proper ways to legislate freedom. But undergirding our centuries-long debate has been the tacit assumption that these ideals are the lifeblood of America. And though Professor Balogh admits to not having paid very good attention when he in Hebrew School, he *does* remember that this is a core Jewish principle as well. Each of us is created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, and Judaism—like America—holds that we are “endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable Rights.”

The framers created a country committed essentially to an ongoing project of expanding human freedom. They didn’t build a stronghold that would hide its treasures and its citizens behind thick walls. They didn’t build an ivory tower that announced its superiority to the rest of the world. Rather, they formed a union out of disparate groups striving to overcome differences in common commitment to a brighter tomorrow.

When the shofar announces that today is Yom Hazikaron, our annual Day of Memory, it challenges Jewish Americans to remember where we are and how we got here. We have made considerable progress in service of America’s ideals – through war and protest, social growth and scientific discovery; through the sustained commitment of millions of individuals in thousands of towns to minor and major pursuits of justice.

The question facing us as we prepare to take the next step on our shared American journey is not how my or your personal liberty is protected. Rather, the question is how we can advance the American project of the expansion of freedom for all. The historians I spoke with were unanimous in their assessment that forgetting America’s past will lead us to repeat its failures. If we ignore the basic principles of our democracy or, even worse, if we endeavor to turn the clock back to a time when fewer Americans enjoyed the dignity of equality, we risk losing sight of what makes us who we are and the ideals our country has stood for.

Historian Ron Chernow, biographer of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, has joined other scholars of American history in raising public awareness about this societal danger. “For the first time in my life,” he says, “I’m actually afraid that we Americans can forget who we are as a people and succumb to historical amnesia. And make no mistake about it: When the past is scrubbed clean and

⁵ Personal interview. August 5, 2016.

American history becomes a blank slate, [anyone] ... can come along and write upon it whatever ... he wants.”⁶ In other words, if we forget the American project, if we fail to examine responsibly our history of both soaring idealism and crippling oppression, if we drown “the better angels of our nature”⁷ in a sea of fury and fear, we risk losing the America where all are created equal. In its place may arise an America that values dollars over democracy and brutality over compassion, that rejects the treasures of cultures around the world, shutting its doors to hopeful men and women yearning to breathe free. This is not the America our forefathers dreamed for us, and it need not be our destiny.

In his correspondence with me, Yale historian Matthew Frye Jacobson shared the following: “I saw a banner at a rally once that said ‘Hate Is Not an American Value.’”⁸ Professor Jacobson paused to consider that statement. He knows that “there’s plenty of evidence” to suggest that hate *is* an American value, for it has been woven into the fabric of our society from Day One.⁹ But our calling, he teaches, is to transcend that history, to strive to achieve the moral virtues that are indeed within reach. Hate is not an American value. “The least we must do,” Professor Jacobson says, “and the most we can do is to fight every day to make that slogan true.”¹⁰

Our tradition offers us an antidote to historical amnesia. Maimonides, one of Judaism’s greatest scholars, teaches that when the shofar calls to us on Rosh Hashanah, it offers us a threefold challenge:

חַפְּשׂוּ בְּמַעֲשֵׂיכֶם, examine your deeds.

הִזְרוּ בְּתְשׁוּבָה, return in repentance.

וְזָכְרוּ בּוֹרְאֵכֶם, And remember the One who created you.¹¹

Each of these challenges requires a fundamental characteristic, namely, honesty, courage, and humility. I believe that these are key ingredients to shaping the future of our country.

חַפְּשׂוּ בְּמַעֲשֵׂיכֶם.

It takes **honesty** to examine our deeds, for better and for worse. Our national failures – like our personal sins – are an alphabet of woe. Algonquin, Blackfoot, Cherokee. Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, eugenics, Plessy vs. Ferguson. The legacies of slavery, displacement, and disenfranchisement continue to be felt today in minority and marginal communities across the country. And at the same time, we can learn much

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7d_OR8DNfY

⁷ Abraham Lincoln’s first inaugural address (March 1861). <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres31.html>.

⁸ Personal correspondence. July 20, 2016.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Rambam’s Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4.

from the tremendous successes we've achieved over the generations. Abolition. The Bill of Rights, the Constitution, the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments, the Emancipation Proclamation. In every era, our society continues to make progress toward the ideals articulated by the Founding Fathers by learning from the past and being honest with ourselves about the work we still have to do.

חֲזְרוּ בְּתַשׁוּבָה.

It takes **courage** to engage in communal repentance. It's easy to bemoan what's wrong with society by casting blame on *those people* who seem to cause all the problems. But "those people" are actually *your* people – *our* people – and we bear responsibility for one another. We are taught that each of us has power to effect real and lasting change in the world. Our tradition urges us to act on our immense potential to make a difference, to partner with the spirit of holiness to repair the world. We may not be able to complete the work, but nor are we free to desist from it.¹²

וְזָכְרוּ בּוֹרְאֵיכֶם.

And finally, to remember the One who created us requires the most important quality of all: **humility**. With humility, we remember that the world doesn't revolve around me and my problems. Sometimes, we must subsume our own needs and desires to make room for the needs and desires of others, who contain in their souls the same divine spark that I have in mine. Humility reminds us to value other people and their perspectives. It reminds us that foreigners enrich our society with their own unique stories and gifts and encourages us to foster goodwill and cooperation among the nations. Humility insists that we treat every person with dignity, whether you're a janitor or a judge, a plumber or the President.

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In 1776, the world heard for the first time: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." This was an idea worth fighting for and dedicating one's life to. At that time, this ideal of freedom was withheld from most of the people who lived in the United States. But it stood as a beacon of hope to all who would call America home.

To commemorate Independence Day nearly 80 years later, Frederick Douglass, himself a former slave, would address a group of abolitionists. In his speech, Douglass excoriates America for upholding slavery year after backbreaking year. But despite the wickedness of American slavery, Douglass insisted that the Declaration of Independence – authored by a slaveholder – contained within it "great principles" that had yet to be achieved.¹³ He challenged his generation to remember those ideals, to

¹² Pirkei Avot 2:21.

¹³ "The Meaning of July Fourth for a Negro" (<http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/douglassjuly4.html>).

humbly learn from them that they had failed to live up to them, and to embark on a painful and difficult path of repentance.

The year following Douglass' most powerful speech, Reverend Theodore Parker would preach famously, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."¹⁴ A century later, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. said the same. Fifty years after that, the first African American President followed suit.

What's next? What will our children and grandchildren remember of the era we bequeath to them? The choice – this year as every year – is ours.

May 5777 be a year of honesty, courage, and humility.

May we, through our *teshuvah*, examine our past to determine who we are and who we hope to be.

And together, may we continue the experiment launched by our ancestors to build a more hopeful, more unified, and more perfect vision of our future.

¹⁴ <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/11/15/arc-of-universe/>