

Parashat Bo: Remembrance is the Secret of Redemption
Exodus 10:1-13:16
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Hebrew has no word for history other than the adopted word *historia*. Our sacred history is not about objective fact, in any case, but about lived and re-enacted experience. Therefore, the sacred word we do have -- *zikaron* / memory – connotes an enduring “calling to mind” that molds, shapes and guides one’s identity. The root ז.כ.ר. (z-k-r) appears over 200 times in the Tanakh, and often in reference to the Exodus.

In his classic book *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Dr. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi notes that the nature of Jewish memory is evocation, identification, and re-actualization, never merely dispassionate recollection. The English translation of *zachor* as “remember” may be too small in scope, and many scholars argue that the word actually implies a level of action. One active way of remembering is through the practice of rituals. “Through memory, the past -- recalled in texts and re-enacted in rituals -- can be made eternally present. Memory both transcends time and endows it with meaning.” [1]

If we translate *zachor* not just as “remember,” but also with the sense of “remain aware of,” it also becomes an active rather than a passive experience.

“Remaining aware” is certainly an essential concept for mindfulness. In Mussar, as well, we are taught of the importance of remembering/ remaining aware:

Remembrance (*z’chirah*) is a *middah* without which this world cannot endure.
All of the dealings of the world are dependent upon remembrance... Remembrance is an exalted trait... [2]

Two weeks ago in Parashot Shemot, God’s capacity for memory catalyzed the entire process of redemption (2:24-25).

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת נַאֲקָתָם וַיִּזְכֹּר 24 And God heard their moaning, and God remembered
אֱלֹהִים אֶת בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת אַבְרָהָם אֶת (va-yizkor) His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and
יִצְחָק וְאֶת יַעֲקֹב. with Jacob.

וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּדַּע 25 God looked upon the Israelites, and God took
אֱלֹהִים. notice/ knew (va-yeida) of them.

So noteworthy was this experience of remembering the covenant that God repeated the episode to Moses (6:5):

וְגַם אֲנִי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת נַאֲקַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, 5 And moreover I have heard the moaning of the Israelites,

אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם מְעַבְדִים אֹתָם וְאָזְכֵר אֶת בְּרִיתִי. whom the Egyptians keep in bondage; and I have remembered My covenant.

Not only had God's awareness (da'at and zikaron) been temporarily in hiatus/ in exile while the Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt, but according to the Hasidic text Me'or Eynayim, so had the awareness of the Israelites themselves:

“ It is well known that the mystery of the going out of Egypt (yetziat mitzrayim) was that awareness (da'at) was in exile and in a diminished state. No one knew how to serve God with joy and expansive mind, with the fullest consciousness. ”

So it is that memory/ awareness in service to action is a recurring theme in Parashat Bo. As the parasha opens, we learn that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, the horrors of the plagues, and the Exodus from Egypt itself have a transcendent and ulterior goal even before Exodus is even realized: to create a collective memory/ awareness for future generations (10:1-2).

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל פַּרְעֹה כִּי אֲנִי הִכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת לְבוֹ וְאֶת לֵב עַבְדָּיו לְמַעַן שְׂמִתִּי אֶת־נִי אֶלָּה בְּקִרְבּוֹ.

1 And Adonai said to Moses: 'Come to Pharaoh for I have made his heart and the heart of his servants stubborn, that I might put My signs in his midst;

וְלִמְעַן תְּסַפֵּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶיךָ וּבְנֵי בְנֶיךָ אֶת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלִיתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת אֲתִמִּי אֲשֶׁר שְׂמִתִּי בָּם וַיִּדְעוּם כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה.

2 and so that you may relate in the ears of your child and your child's child what I have wrought upon Egypt, and My signs which I have put among them that you may know that I am Adonai.'

This idea of "teaching one's children" appears three other times in the parasha, and becomes the basis (along with one other passage from Deuteronomy 6:20-21) for the four children that appear in the Passover haggadah.

- (1) And it shall be that when your children say to you, "What do you mean by this rite?" You shall say "It is a passover sacrifice to Adonai Who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians..." (12:26-27)
- (2) And you shall tell (וְהִגַּדְתָּ, -- v'higadata) your child on that day, saying "It is because of what Adonai did for me when I went free from Egypt." (13:8)
- (3) In days to come when your child asks you, "What does this mean?" say to him, "With a mighty hand Adonai brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. (13:14)

The pedagogical purpose of Exodus -- and the fledgling beginnings of a Passover seder to promulgate it -- is thus established. In these four examples in Parashat Bo, memory becomes a form of action through teaching and telling the story.

This theme of the perpetuation of collective memory from generation to generation is also invoked in three other instances in the parashah in which words containing the root letters **ז.כ.ר** are actually introduced. First, in 12:14, we read:

וְהָיָה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לָכֶם לְזִכְרוֹן
וְחָגְגְתֶם אֹתוֹ חָג לַיהוָה לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם
חֻקֵּת עוֹלָם תִּחְגְּגֶנּוּ.
And this day shall be for you for as a memorial (zikaron),
and you shall celebrate it as a festival for Adonai;
throughout your generations you shall celebrate it as an
everlasting statute.

And then in 13:3, we read:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם זָכוֹר אֵת
הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר יִצְאָתֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם
מִבַּיִת עֲבָדִים כִּי בְחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיא
יְהוָה אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה אֶי אֲכַל חֻמֵץ.
And Moses said unto the people: Remember (zachor) this
day on which you departed from Egypt, out of the house of
bondage for with a strong hand Adonai brought you out
from this place, and therefore chametz shall not be eaten.'

In this case, our ritual of not eating chametz on Passover is another way for memory to become actualized.

Finally, in 13:9 we get this evocative verse:

וְהָיָה לָךְ לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ
וְלְזִכְרוֹן בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ
לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה תּוֹרַת יְהוָה בְּפִי
כִּי בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיא יְהוָה
מִמִּצְרַיִם.
And it shall be for you a sign (ot) on your hand, and for a
reminder (zikaron) between your eyes so that Adonai's
Torah may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand Adonai
brought you out from Egypt.

So important is this idea of having a physical reminder of the Exodus on our bodies that it gets repeated a few verses later in 13:16:

וְהָיָה לְאוֹת עַל יָדְכָה וּלְטוֹטְפֹת בֵּין
עֵינֶיךָ כִּי בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ יְהוָה
מִמִּצְרַיִם.
And it shall be a sign (ot) upon thy hand, and a symbol
(totafot) between your eyes for with a strong hand Adonai
brought us out from Egypt.'

Whether the actual ritual garment of tefillin was imagined by the Biblical writer or not, the words zikaron (reminder/ memorial), ot (sign), and totafot (symbol) connote some kind of material object

that would serve to jog the memory as an embodied manifestation of the memory of Exodus. That object – now tefillin -- further evokes Exodus because the symbol on the hand/ arm serves as a reminder of God’s strong hand mentioned in both verses. (See spiritual practice #4 below, in which the kavannah for donning tefillin specifically mentions God’s strong hand/ arm.)

This morning I went to minyan and paid special attention to the men putting on their tefillin. This ritual garment never resonated with me until now (in fact, I’ve actively rebelling against it for feminist reasons), but it seems like wrapping the tefillin could be a deep meditative practice and ritual. And I am drawn to its deep connection to Exodus which I’d never really understood before.

However, assuming that many of us do not regularly wear tefillin as part of our ritual garb, there is yet one other “object” in this week’s parashah that serves as a memorial to the Exodus to which we probably all adhere -- the Jewish calendar.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר. 1 Adonai said to Moses and Aaron in the land of
Egypt:

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֹאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים רַאשׁוֹן הוּא
לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה. 2 ‘This month shall be for you the beginning of
months; it shall be for you the first month of the
year’ (12:1-2)

Since the first month of the Jewish calendar is Nisan, the month in which the Exodus occurred, we are always counting time from that historic event, and we are always reminded of “God’s active presence in history.” [3]

Since a slave’s time was the property of his/ her master, having a “calendar of one’s own” for a newly-freed slave was radical, a revolutionary gift “granted to free man, because time belongs to him; it is his time, and he can utilize it to the utmost or waste it.” [4]

However, the gift of Exodus is bigger even than that of time. The Baal Shem Tov is quoted as saying that “forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption.” If Exodus/ redemption is understood metaphorically not only as a one-time historical event but as an ongoing phenomenon, it is obvious that we must continually remember the original experience in Egypt in order to avoid returning to spiritual exile. By remaining slaves to habit, to old beliefs, or paradoxically, to memories, we run the risk of returning to spiritual exile. Memory, after all, can either enslave or free us!

We know that spiritual practices such as Mussar or mindfulness, which can actually change our consciousness, are antidotes to such spiritual slavery. Knowing and believing that change is possible is the ultimate gift of the Exodus narrative.

Jewish tradition offers us many opportunities -- we might call them mnemonics -- to remember the Exodus as practices for mindfulness, remembrance, and a call for change of consciousness: Passover

(the eating of matza, the prohibition of chametz, the seder, the telling, the questioning), tefillin, observing the Jewish calendar, the Shabbat evening kiddush (in which Shabbat is called “zecher litziat mitzrayim”) and our daily liturgy in which the Mi Chamocha prayer for redemption, as well as the six remembrances (recited by some during morning prayers) [5] are reminders of our obligation to remember. Even on Rosh Hashanah (a.k.a. Yom haZikaron), we recall Exodus: “With love You have bestowed upon us this Day of Remembrance, a day for the shofar sound, a day for holy assembly and for recalling the Exodus from Egypt.” Parashat Bo is replete with such injunctions for doing so.

An interviewer said to Elie Wiesel, “You seem to live in the past.” He responded, “I don’t live in the past. But what can I do? -- the past lives in me.” May the past live in you that you should “remember the day when you left Egypt all the days of your life” [6] and, more importantly, that you leave Egypt every day of your life.

Spiritual practices for Parashat Bo

(a) Consider how and if the special aids mentioned above are useful for you to remember the Exodus (Passover, tefillin, the Jewish calendar, Shabbat evening kiddush, the Mi Chamocha prayer, the six remembrances). How might you use them to deepen your commitment to the deeper meaning of Exodus: personal change and deepening consciousness? Are there other practices that help you “get there?” And what would it mean to you to “remember Egypt every day of your life?”

(b) If you meditate, reflect on these words of our teacher Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg in which she frames her experience of meditation as a personal Exodus experience. Journal about your own experience as it relates to Exodus:

My first ten-day silent retreat was unbearably difficult....It was also life changing...Awareness (da’at) was emerging from exile in these moments and offering this mind the possibility of true liberation... Even on that first retreat some 22 years ago, the language of Yetziat Mitzrayim, the going forth from the narrow (tzar) place of mitzrayim, the land of constricted consciousness, spoke to my immediate experience. I realized that it was possible to train the mind and heart to remember this going forth all the days of my life, as a daily, immediate, life-affirming, and sustaining practice. This practice enabled me to teach Torah through the lens of mindfulness and to teach mindfulness through the language of Torah. [7]

3. Read “Let Them Remember” by Yehuda Amichai in which memory appears to be a burden. When is memory itself a source of enslavement and when is it a source of liberation in your experience? What do you think Amichai would say about Exodus specifically, if it were included in this poem?

Let Them Remember

Let the memorial hill remember instead of me.
that’s what it’s here for: Let the park in-memory-of remember;

Let the street that's-named-for remember;
let the well-known building remember;
let the synagogue that's named after God remember
let the rolling Torah scroll remember; let the prayer
for the memory of the dead remember: Let the flags remember;
those multicolored shrouds of history; the bodies they wrapped
have long since turned to dust. Let the dust remember:
Let the dung remember at the gate. Let the afterbirth remember:
Let the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens
eat and remember;
Let all of them remember so that I can rest.

4. If donning tefillin is part of your prayer practice -- or you'd like to make it part of your prayer practice -- be attentive to the following two kavanot:

Behold, in putting on tefillin, I intend to fulfill the commandments of my Creator Who has commanded us to put on tefillin, as is written in His Torah: "Bind them as a sign upon your arm and let them be totafot between your eyes" (Deut. 6:8). These four portions contain his Oneness and Unity, may His Name be blessed in the universe, so that we will recall the miracles and wonders that He did with us when He removed us from Egypt...He has commanded us to put [tefillin] upon the arm to recall the "outstretched arm" [of the Exodus]... (from the ArtScroll siddur)

One should take great care to keep the memory from falling into forgetfulness, which is an aspect of the death of the heart... And in order to keep this memory, one should take great care not to fall into the aspect of the evil eye, to the aspect of the death of the heart. For the essence of memory is dependent on the eye, as is written "for a memorial between the eyes" (Exodus 13:9). For loss of memory is caused by the evil eye..." (Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, Likutei Moharan)

Footnotes

[1] Debra Orenstein, "Memory: A Point of Entry to Our Past" in *Rosh Hashanah Readings: Inspiration, Information, and Contemplation* edited by Dov Peretz Elkins, p. 281)

[2] *Orchot Tzaddikim*

[3] Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, p. 54

[4] Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Chumash Mesoras HaRav: Shemot*, pp. 85-86

[5] The six remembrances (shesh zechirot) are:

1. To remember the Exodus from Egypt -- "Remember the day when you left Egypt all the days of your life." (Deuteronomy 16:3)
2. To remember the sin of the Golden Calf
3. To remember the giving of the Torah
4. To remember the Shabbat
5. To remember the attack of Amalek
6. To remember the sin of Miriam

[6] Deuteronomy 6:3

[7] Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg, "Leaving Egypt Again: Aging with Awareness" in *Chapters of the Heart: Jewish Women Sharing the Torah of Our Lives*, edited by Sue Levi Elwell and Nancy Fuchs Kreimer, pp. 156-157