

The Women Who Could Never Forget – Shabbat Zachor

In May 2008, ABC's Diane Sawyer conducted an incredible interview with a woman named Jill Price. Price was 42 years old, widowed, and working as a school administrator at a synagogue in California. She is also said to have the most amazing memory ever known to science. From age 14 onward, Price is able to recall past events as if she is watching them on split screen inside her head. This means that she can tell you on demand when the last episode of *Dallas* aired or list the dates of the last 20 Easters; it also means that she is able to relive virtually any moment of her life, good or bad, in extraordinary intensity and detail. Price not only remembers banal particulars from twenty years prior (such as what she ate for lunch or what the temperature was like on a given day), but her memories have the vividness of real-time experience, undiminished by the passage of time. This is both an enormous blessing and a terrible curse.

Imagine being unable to forget anything. As oddly appealing as this might initially sound, let's think it through a little bit further. A perfect memory would allow us to accurately immortalize those we have loved and lost; it would give us passage back into our childhood and early years; it would score us a tremendous advantage on history tests and at Trivial Pursuit. But would perfect memory really be so desirable? Price describes it, at times, as being a prisoner of one's past. "Some memories are good and give me a warm, safe feeling," she says. "But I also recall every bad decision, insult, and excruciating embarrassment. Over the years it has eaten me up. It has kind of paralyzed me" (Barry Wigmore, *The Woman Who Can't Forget Anything*, 5/8/08). Perfect memory means reliving painful experiences over and over again; it means wounds not healed by time and experience unmitigated by the release of those events we might wish to leave behind. In the words of journalists Keturah Gray and Katie Escherich, "Price's experience serves as a reminder that our lives and happiness may be shaped not only by what

we remember but by what we choose to forget” (Keturah Gray and Katie Escherich, *Woman Who Can't Forget Amazes Doctors*, 5/9/08). A faulty memory may deprive us of certain cherished recollections but it also allows us to move forward, unencumbered by the dark places of our past.

Zachor et asher asah l'cha Amalek – Remember what Amalek did to you. These words are from the beginning of today's *maftir aliyah*, the special Torah reading from the book of Deuteronomy which is chanted each year on *Shabbat Zachor*, the Shabbat of Remembrance which precedes Purim. The people of Amalek are seen as Judaism's quintessential villains – heartless and opportunistic assassins who attack from the rear, targeting the weakest and most vulnerable members of society without giving them fair fight. The malevolent qualities of the Amalekites also remind us of another dangerous felon whose story we will soon recount – the evil Haman who is actually said to be a descendent of Amalek, one man's legacy of wickedness giving rise to the next. On *Shabbat Zachor* we commit ourselves to remembering Amalek's misdeeds, locating the upcoming Purim celebration in its proper context: that of never abandoning our fight against evil. This act of memory is so important that hearing the Torah chanted on *Shabbat Zachor* is a special *mitzvah* all its own. To enter into the joyous festivities of Purim without also acknowledging the grim realities of evil in our world is irresponsible at best. At worst, it is downright dangerous.

Purim and *Shabbat Zachor* – in many respects these two days are direct inverses of one another. Today we recall the name of Amalek, even requiring our community to be present as it is chanted aloud from the Torah; on Purim we drown out the name of Haman, rendering it completely inaudible with our impassioned gragging. Today we directly confront the theme of murder, treating our fight against evil with all the seriousness which it deserves; on Purim we engage in silly antics and dress in masquerade, as if to distract ourselves from the terrible pain of the story which we recount. Today we cast the

Israelites into sharp relief with Amalek, making ourselves absolutely distinct from the evil-doers we so disdain; on Purim we are encouraged to drink until we can no longer tell the difference between righteous Mordechai and wicked Haman. If *Shabbat Zachor* emphasizes remembrance, Purim seems to emphasize forgetting – or at least obscuring memory – through suppression, drunkenness, trivialization and humor.

In general, we as Jews are a people of memory. We observe not only birthdays but also *yahrtzeits* (memorials) to remember those who were dear to us, now departed. We break a glass at weddings and fast on *Tisha B'Av* (9th of Av) to remember the destruction of the Temple, an historical event that occurred nearly 2,000 years ago. Our holidays are not simple celebrations but rather historical reenactments – dwelling in booths on Sukkot, eating *matzah* on Pesach, raising the Torah high to recreate standing at Sinai on Shavuot. Indeed, we embrace both the good and the painful elements of our history - believing that recalling the past brings honor to those parts that should be emulated and helps us to learn from those parts that must be rejected.

And then we find ourselves at Purim. And although it may seem as if we are again engaging in acts of memory, in truth we are doing anything but. Most scholars believe that *Megillat Esther*, the scroll that we read on this festival, is either pure parody or at least a greatly exaggerated version of the historical events it wishes to recount. The way in which we narrate the story – a rather horrifying tale of near extinction and violent retribution told with spiel and spoofing, costumes and good cheer – further detaches us from the true meaning of the Purim tale, leading us into a world of fantasy rather than reality.

So why is it that Purim is celebrated in this way, our traditional commitment to memory seemingly uprooted? I would like to suggest that it gets back to the story of Jill Price and the lesson she has to teach us about what it means to never forget. “Over the years it has eaten me up,” Price says of her perfect memory. “It has kind of paralyzed me.” Memory can be a powerful thing – a source of meaning and identity and connection to others, a force for good impelling us towards renewed commitment as with our dedication towards fighting evil when we remember the horrific deeds of Amalek. At the same time, memory can also be a yoke – saddling us with hurt, anger and resentment that leave us tethered in place, unable to move forward in a productive fashion. This dilemma of remembering, but perhaps not too much, becomes particularly pronounced when it comes to such things as the misdeeds of another people; while we must remember the evil that Amalek and Haman represent, the dangers of living in a world where the strong are allowed to prey upon the weak and where human life is completely devalued, perpetuating legacies of hatred can just as easily lead to intolerance, vengeance, and cycles of violence and loathing that become incredibly hard to break. For nations, as for individuals, the issue is one of balance – how to temper our need for remembrance with our need for release. How wise it is for our tradition, then, to contain both *Shabbat Zachor* and *Chag Purim*!

Of course, using the legacies of Purim and *Shabbat Zachor* constructively is not only a matter of balance but also one of intention – how we consciously decide to apply these stories in order to educate and inspire others. We can tell the narratives of this season in such a way that they foster animosity and hatred or we can tell these stories in such a way that they foster good works, wiping out the modern day Amalek not by destroying his person but rather by rendering the values which he holds dear obsolete. I am proud to say that it is this latter approach which Judaism embraces, and it begins on the day of Purim itself when we are commanded to send *mishloach manot* – treat baskets to our friends – and *matanot l’evyonim* – gifts to the poor. We respond to Haman’s terrible plot not by recommitting

ourselves to fight modern day enemies but rather by recommitting ourselves to create the kind of society that Haman would have detested – one marked by community, by cooperation, and by concern for those less fortunate.

Purim is a time to wipe out the world of Amalek – a world where there are disparities between the secure and the struggling, a world where vulnerabilities are preyed upon rather than supported, a world where human life and human dignity are not taken seriously. And so as we step into our costumes and bake our *hamantaschen*, pour our *l'chayims* and break into *spiel*, I hope that we will also think carefully about what an anti-Haman world might truly look like and what it would take to help get us there. “For one day in 365 we forget [Haman] the easy way,” writes JTS Chancellor Arnold Eisen in explaining the raucous revelry of the holiday. “So that the other 364 we can work on the harder path to real forgetting: *tikkun olam* [repairing the world].” We remember just enough to start creating change and forget just enough to stave off bitterness.

“Over the years it has eaten me up. It has kind of paralyzed me,” says Jill Price of her perfect memory. May the legacies of Purim and *Shabbat Zachor* help us to remember exactly the right amount – enough to act rather than to stagnate, enough to hope rather than to hate, enough to create a world free of Amalek and the values for which he stood. A very happy Purim to all! Shabbat Shalom.