**Genetic Memory: Pesach Yizkor 5783**

I'm no expert in animal behavior, but recently I heard a story about the giant green sea turtle which captured my attention. You see, each year large packs of sea turtles swim hundreds of miles from their home on the Brazilian coast to a small land mass in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean in order to mate. With an area of only about 34 square miles, Ascension Island is so tiny that even airplanes – with their sophisticated technology and tracking equipment – have trouble finding it. And yet the turtles have no such difficulty, traveling consistently and reliably across the waters each season to breed.

For years, conservation biologist Dr. Archie Carr studied the giant green sea turtle in order to understand how these reptiles were able to perform such an incredible feat. And his conclusion was fascinating! Carr claims that the turtles navigate their journey using what he calls genetic memory – a type of recall that is present from birth and exists even in the absence of direct sensory experience. Millions of years ago, when a large strip of earth bisected the Atlantic, the distance from Brazil to the closest stretch of this land was but a short swim. And even when the mass became submerged, the turtles were still able to locate the last lingering remnant of it, Ascension Island, based on their genetic coding passed down from generation to generation. Every year the turtles return to perpetuate not only their species but also the memory of this very special place. On Passover, we do quite the same– re-telling an ancient narrative never experienced firsthand yet written into our very DNA!

"*B'chol dor vador chayav adam lirot et atzmo c'ilu ha yatza miMitzrayim* – In every generation a person should see themself as if they, personally, went out from Egypt." While the poetry of this sentiment is quite beautiful – all of us should feel intimately and urgently connected to the Passover story, we should understand these events as if they happened to us personally, we should experience them not

dispassionately as a tale about others but rather emotionally as a memory about ourselves – the logic of these words is more complicated. Not only weren't any of us, or even anyone that we've ever known, physically present at the moment of the Exodus but most of us cannot even fathom living under any of the many indignities described in the haggadah's difficult tale. We've never been forced to perform back-breaking labor against our will. We've never lived without autonomy and freedom. We've never felt the clap of a taskmaster's whip. We've never had to give up our first-born baby babies. We've never lived in fear that the smallest wrong word or gesture could cost us our lives. We've never left all that is familiar in order to wander through the desert for forty long years. We've never suffered under tyranny and oppression. We've never been robbed of the opportunity to make our own decisions and chart our own course. *B'chol dor vador chayav adam lirot et atzmo c'ilu ha yatza miMitzrayim*. What can it possibly mean to see ourselves as if we personally escaped from Egypt when our own life experiences are so very much to the contrary?

If a conservation biologist were to study the Jewish people, I can't be certain that she'd find scientific evidence of genetic memory but I, for one, believe that it exists. The memories that we, as Jews, carry may not be written into our genetic code but they're certainly hardwired into our psyches and spirits – that inexplicable sense of connection that we have to events that happened long before we were born be it the Exodus, or the Spanish Inquisition, or (for some of us) the Holocaust. Genetic memory explains why many of us felt deeply tied to the State of Israel long before we actually set foot there, why we sense an immediate connection to other Jews around the world even when we come from different backgrounds and perhaps don't even speak the same language, how we can so instantly be comfortable in a synagogue halfway across the world with people whom we've never met. Even without direct sensory experience our hearts carry memories passed down to us from ancestors long ago. In this way, we can be eyewitnesses to events that we never personally experienced.

This morning we gather together for Yizkor, Judaism's sacred hour of remembrance and honor. Many of us recall today individuals we knew extremely well – spouses with whom we shared lives and created families, parents whose unconditional love and support buoyed us each day, siblings who were our first friends and closest confidantes, children in whom we took enormous pride and delight. The sadness that we feel comes from loss – all the times that we wish they were here beside us, the everyday moments diminished by their absence, the many, many things – large and small – that we miss about them always. We think of grand-parents who spoiled and adored us, friends whose kindness and humor carried us through good and bad, other treasured individuals who have left gaping holes in our lives. Today, like all days, we remember them and what they meant to us.

Some of us, too, however, recall today individuals who we didn't know so very well, if we even knew them at all – relatives who died before we were born or while we were quite young, family members for whom we were named, people that we remember because they were important to people who are important to us – even if we never had the pleasure of meeting them. Some of us say Yizkor this morning for relatives of a different generation who no longer have direct mourners to say these prayers themselves. We all join together in remembering those murdered in the Holocaust, individuals with whom we were never personally acquainted.

Genetic memory is one of the many things that helps the Yizkor service to feel so very meaningful. For while it might seem strange to "remember" someone who we never even knew in the first place, we understand that emotional recall, much like physical recall, can exist even without direct experience. I never met my cousin Siggy, the sweet, quiet Holocaust survivor who arrived in this country sad and broken having lost his entire family in the Shoah. But I know that he bonded in a powerful way with my Uncle Rich, then just a little boy, and because of the deep affection I have for my uncle I feel a sense of

loss for this man that I never even knew. My own niece and nephew were never lucky enough to meet my father, their Pop-pop, but I know that they will one day find themselves saddened at Yizkor time, filled with memories that feel like their own about him ordering (very rare) meat at a restaurant "still mooing," or wearing penny loafers without socks even in the winter, or asking "Who I am going to hug tomorrow" when we said goodbye at the end of a visit. *B'chol dor vador chayav adam lirot et atzmo c'ilu ha yatza miMitzrayim.* A person doesn't need to be physically present in order to feel something as if it is their own. Genetic memory is a testament to the enduring power of love.

And so this morning we begin again, like the turtles plunging into the painful yet soothing waters of memory and letting them lead us back to a place where our ancestors once lived. As we make this journey of devotion and honor, we're guided by our own experiences and recall and we're carried by the collective memory of our relatives, our community, our tradition that fills in the gaps where our own powers of recollection fail. "*B'chol dor vador chayav adam lirot et atzmo c'ilu ha yatza miMitzrayim* – In every generation a person should see themself as if they, personally, went out from Egypt." Genetic memory makes just such an impractical feat possible.

*Y'hi zichram baruch* – May the memories of our loved ones always be for a blessing.

Rabbi Annie Tucker