

Every family has its idiosyncrasies. Many of the ones in my family stem from my father. He is an amazing dad, teaching lessons to this day. Dare I say, he's an even better grandfather dotting upon his grandchildren with a fierce love. In our family unit though, he may be most well known for Maysharone legends.

Maysharone is his nickname and legends are his forte. Questioned constantly for their veracity, my father has, for all of my life, been a weaver of tales. His grandchildren now know it to be one of his greater attributes. Whether about our own family history, the world at large, or Jewish legends, my dad can tell a story with the best of them. It's a real talent, whether or not some of them may or may not be true.

The other idiosyncrasy that relates to this is the Yolkut recap. After almost any gathering you can think of: wedding, funeral, big dinner with the wider clan, many members of the family gather to discuss and process through the event. There are some more passionate participants in this process and others who chose to remain less frequent participants. Most famously, my oldest brother and his wife, after their wedding, came to the family wide recap on their wedding night.

I've always wondered about these two peculiar parts of my family. Thinking that they were a silly part of our family culture, I'd always consider them as something uniquely quirky. Personally speaking, I also haven't been the most avid participant. Often I just want to go to sleep or in the case of my father's legends, I tend to laugh them as the inner workings of his own mind...

Until recently, in my own early journeys with my son Cal, I have found myself regaling him with many of the same stories and recaps of my youth. What I once saw as ridiculous and sort of strange has now been woven into my own life. He doesn't understand them but passing them on feels important.

As I thought about why I began to do this, sharing tales of family lore with my son, I realized something powerful about memory. It wasn't just sharing only the goodness of these family memories. There were meaningful lessons embedded in each that I wanted Cal to remember. I worried on some deep level, if I don't share them with him, will some of these legends, albeit apocryphal, goofy, and even slightly unhinged, be forgotten?

We have to remember; we can't forget. Our Torah portion this week, continuing on in Moshe's lengthy discussion with the people, discusses the goodness of life in the land of Israel when they finally make it. They will have plenty of food; make sure to bless it. Their cattle will thrive. They will amass wealth. Prosperity will be widespread. All of this presumably because the people will have followed God's directives to a 'T.'

And then we read the following in Devarim 8:12-14:

beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget your God יהוה — who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage; who led you through the great and terrible wilderness with its seraph serpents and scorpions, a parched land with no water in it, who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your ancestors had never known, in order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end—

More retelling of a story with which we are familiar: the slavery, the scary wilderness with its landscape full of monsters and brutal conditions. And the point of it all seems to be declared at the outset.

וְרָם לְבַבְךָ וְשָׁכַחְתָּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

Don't let your heart get too prideful such that you forget about God.

How quickly the Torah is worried we might forget all that has befallen us, the good, bad, and the ugly. So it warns us. Don't get arrogant. When you're arrogant you forget. All of this, as the end of these verses allude, is to help us- **בְּאַחֲרֵי־תֵךְ לְהִטְבִּיבָהּ**-to make us good in the end.

So with these verses, two questions stand out:

1. Why are not forgetting and, by definition, remembering so important?
2. What is the goodness that results?

To answer the first we turn to the Baal Shem Tov, the progenitor of modern day Chassidism. Born at the end of the 17th century in the Carpathian Mountains in Poland, the Besht, as he is known, offers a succinctly penetrating explanation of these verses:

The essential warning of all the Torah is the commandment to remember and that forgetting, which is its opposite, God forbid destroys the whole Torah. As it is with an individual, so it is with humanity – exile flows from forgetting and redemption from remembering.

The word remember appears in the Torah nearly 200 times. We are a people with a history but we're not solely a historical people. We are a people devoted to memory.

Here, the Besht distills the whole of the Torah down to memory. If you forget, and here he doesn't specify, but one can imagine he means forgetting about your connection to God, your past, and your people, you have undermined the whole purpose of the Torah.

Everything we do is a means to remember that which came before, in order to keep the chain alive and to remind us of our smallness. This isn't done to diminish us but rather serve as a check on our ego. We get so caught up in the work of our hands that sometimes we think all of our successes come by our own strength. But it's not so. Remembering leads to humility.

Not only that but he ends with the beautiful turn of phrase that exile stems from forgetfulness and memory brings redemption. When we forget, we lose our grounding and our connection. So much of what propels us forward in life is a recognition of how we've gotten there. Exile is a loss of a center and a home. Of course, it's only natural then that when you're living a life where you're forgetting who you are and what you stand for, you'll be adrift.

But to find redemption, to exist in a perfect world, this only happens with a growth mindset. Where are your failings? Where are your successes? Who are the people who laid the path for you? Part of that remembering is doing so in a holistic sense. You can't just remember the good and forget about the bad. That's how you wind up in this potentially problematic situation in the first place.

Most arrogant people I know are unable to face accountability for their actions. Part of that stems from the ease with which they forget about their past misdeeds.

Before he became a renowned Jewish educator, Rabbi Avraham Infeld came from a long line of physicists. From the day he was born, his father fully expected his Avraham to be one of the greats – another Einstein. On his first day at Hebrew University, Abraham looked out the window and saw a beautiful woman passing by and entering the history building. He followed her in, changed his course of study, and fell in love with this woman who would become the grandmother of their now 14 grandchildren.

When he sent his father a telegram notifying him of his change of studies, his father, forgetting his dreams for Avraham's great physics career, wrote back with anger: "What do you mean the Hebrew university teaches Jewish history? Are they crazy? Jews don't have history, they have memory." All of this: the Torah, our stories of our journeys, our missteps and successes are meant to inculcate us with a vital message. We are active agents in the proliferation of our people's memory. If we don't tell these stories, they become a stagnant and dusty history. Memory is alive.

It's not just for the collective but it also for the individual. As you remember, the verses end with *לְהִיטֵבָּךְ בְּאַחֲרֵיֶיךָ*-to make us good in the end. Often translated as beneficial or good for you, we would have expected it to say, *leheitiv lecha*, but it doesn't. This nuance in the language is noted by the Netziv in his commentary, Ha'emek Davar where he says:

Rather it means "to make you good." It is said in order to accustom you to trust in God, even until your final moment.

It's not a benefit for you. It's a literal lesson in how to embody goodness throughout your whole life. In other words, it's a practice that you need to cultivate until it becomes second nature. We embody our memories.

That gets me back to my father and his legends and my family and its recaps. Perhaps they are a bit silly and sometimes inappropriate, but there's real Torah and wisdom in them. As I think about what I want to pass along to my family, the lessons resound.

And perhaps that's what the Torah wants to remind us too. Don't stop telling the stories. Keep yourselves connected and grounded. Don't let your heart and head grow too big thinking it's all about you. This thing is so much bigger than any one of us. Remember-don't forget!

Shabbat Shalom,
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