

Memory Community and Identity – A Jewish Perspective

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The Biblical Imperative to remember

Identity does not exist without memory; and this is especially so regarding a community that seeks continuity, as the latter cannot be sustained without shared memory.

The late American Jewish scholar Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, argued that the Jewish people was unique in elevating the very act of remembering to a religious imperative ("Zakhor: Jewish history and memory", University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1999.) If there is a secret to Judaism's survival, he indicated that it must surely be Judaism's success in making individuals "remember" things that never happened to them personally.

Indeed the Biblical imperative of remembering is apparently mentioned 169 times in the Torah (the Pentateuch.)

Such focus on memory is particularly and uniquely the case regarding the festival in the Hebrew calendar that will take place in less than a fortnight - the festival of Passover, which celebrates what has been described by a modern Jewish scholar as "the orientating event of Jewish history".

Central to the Seder, the ritual meal on the first night of Passover (first **two** nights, in the Diaspora) is the recitation (Haggadah) of the story of the Exodus in keeping with the injunction (Exodus 13:8) "and you shall tell your child on that day saying, (this is) because of that which God did for me when I came forth from Egypt ; and it shall be for a sign on your hand and as a *remembrance* between your eyes."

In addition and in accordance with explicit Biblical instruction, we eat bitter herbs to remember the bitterness of slavery in Egypt and eat matza/special unleavened bread in commemoration of the hasty departure that did not allow time for the dough to rise as our ancestors left Egypt. Based on the Oral Torah (though referring to the text of the Divine promise of redemption in Exodus 6:6) we also toast Divine redemption with four glasses of wine for each person.

In other words, we actually ingest and imbibe the experience, in accordance with the words of the Haggadah that "in each and every generation, a person must see himself as if he himself came out of Egypt ". Thus memory becomes far more important than history (the central point of Yerushalmi's aforementioned book.)

While each individual is called upon to actively experience and memorialize this event, it is celebrated as a communal experience.

During Temple times, the rituals were even more detailed and expansive involving the offering of the Paschal lamb and the elaborate specifics concerning its consumption within the familial setting. (viz.Exodus 12:1-20)

Facto ergo sum

The 13th century work, Sefer ha-Chinuch (the Book of Education), which systematically discusses the commandments of the Torah, comments on why there is so much ritual requirement concerning the Passover commemoration. The behaviouralist explanation given, might be taken as something of a description of the mindset of Judaism as a whole. The author states that "a person is formed according to his actions", or in another phrase "the heart follows the actions". In other words, it is not "cogito ergo sum", nor even theological affirmations that make us what we are; but rather it is our actions that form us. Regenerating memory through action; reenacting the physical experiences as we do at the Passover table; renews the sense of identity and community and our commitment to them.

The nineteenth century Jewish luminary Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch conveys this idea in the following comment:

"Let us examine the night of the redemption and the exodus from Egypt, a unique moment in the history of mankind as a whole. A moment... to which we are brought by the entire national past... Is this not an opportunity (for the Biblical text) to speak, to orate, to preach, to lecture, to excite, to present and to awaken?! But how few words do we meet. In its place we encounter... a series of acts which are given over to the people. "A lamb for each household... and you shall slaughter it... and take the blood... and eat the flesh."...

These are no more than symbols and actions... (but) which have the power to cause messages to penetrate with greater power than all the declarations, lectures and oratory ("Nineteen Letters", Hirsch's *Gesammelte Schriften*, III. 263-265.)

Indeed, as powerful as the experience of the festival of Passover is; the Bible actually instructs us to "*remember* the day of your going out of Egypt **all the days of your life**" (Deuteronomy 16:3). Accordingly the third paragraph of the central recitation in the daily liturgy, every morning and evening, known as the Shema (the first word of Deuteronomy 6:4. **Hear** O Israel") is taken from Numbers 15:37-41 concerning the tzitzit (the ritual fringes on a four cornered garment) which is to remind us constantly of Divine redemption with the Exodus from Egypt.

To what ends are all these remembrances?

Rabbi Soloveitchik and the Two Covenants

One of the greatest rabbinic minds of the late twentieth century was Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik, the scion of one of Eastern European Jewry's most illustrious rabbinic families, but who lived most of his life in the US.

In his classical work "Kol Dodi dofek" ("the voice of my Beloved is knocking", Canticles 5:2), he points to the fact that apparently two Covenants are made by the Almighty with the Children of Israel. The first is the Covenant made with them in Egypt with the promise of Divine redemption from bondage: "and I will take you for Me as (for) a people and I will be for you as (for) God" (Exodus 6:7).

However, when the Torah/Divine Revelation was given to the people at Sinai, a second Covenant was made: "And [Moses] took the book (perhaps better translated "account") of the Covenant...and said, 'Behold the blood of the Covenant which the Lord has established with you concerning all these words'" (Exodus 24:7-8).

Rabbi Soloveitchik describes the first of these Covenants as "B'rit Goral ", the Covenant of Fate; and the second, as B'rit Yi'ud (usually translated as the Covenant of Destiny. However in my opinion the English word is too close to the meaning of the word fate. Soloveitchik's use of the word "yi'ud" is closer to the English word "purpose". Perhaps "destiny of purpose" is a good translation.)

The Covenant of Fate

The Covenant of "goral", fate, is not a matter of choice. It is the very consequence of being part of the Jewish people. This is essentially a natural collective solidarity and identity, but with a sense of virtual inescapability for better and worse.

The sages in the Talmud declare that "all Israel are responsible for one another" (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 27b).

Rabbi Soloveitchik elaborates with the following words "all Israel are knit together--we will all be pursued unto death or we will all be redeemed with eternal salvation."

At its most lachrymose, this is an acknowledgement that anti-Semitism is never just a hostility against an individual Jew. Like Haman in ancient Persia " it was trifling in his eyes to set his hand just against Mordechai alone.....and he sought to exterminate all the Jews, the people of Mordechai, in all Ahasuerus' empire (Esther 3:6)

Indeed Jewish collective solidarity implicitly acknowledges that an attack on a Jew in one part of the world is an attack on a Jew in another.

One wonders whether Shakespeare had some intuition of this when he puts the words of Shylock in the first person plural "If you prick **us**, do **we** not bleed?"

A Jewish witticism tells of a Jewish immigrant who arrived on New York's lower East Side and sought the company of other Jews. Not knowing whom, or where they might be, he went out into the street and shouted in Yiddish: "Man schlogt Yidden!" (= they are beating up Jews.) Several people quickly surrounded him and demanded to know where this was happening. The man replied: "In my village in Russia; does anyone here care?"

The imperative of "all Israel are responsible for one another" is the obligation to one another, especially but not only in times of distress. Such collective responsibility is to be seen in the manifold philanthropic organizations that the Jewish community has traditionally maintained. In Soloveitchik's words, it is

"the consciousness of the fate imposed upon the people against their will and of their terrible isolation that is the source of the people's unity, of their togetherness. It is precisely this consciousness as the source of the people's togetherness which summons and stirs the community of fate to achieve a positive mode of togetherness through ongoing, joint participation in its own historical circumstances, in its suffering, conscience, and acts of mutual aid."

This responsibility also places the burden of collective representation on the individual Jew. As generalizations will always be made from the individual Jew to the community as a whole, this places a special obligation on the Jew to behave in a manner that reflects positively on the group and vice versa. Again in Soloveitchik's words:-

"The actions of the individual are charged to the account of the community. Any sin he commits besmirches the name of Israel in the world. The individual, therefore, must answer not only to his own personal conscience but also to the collective conscience of the people."

Prophets and Sages on covenant, survival and suffering

This idea that Soloveitchik describes as "the Covenant of Fate" finds its expression in the Bible in the very concept of the eternity of Israel; and the unlimited mercy of the Almighty to always give the people "another chance", no matter how badly they have behaved.

"Yet for all that, (even) when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not have spurned them nor abhor them to destroy them utterly and break my Covenant with them" (Leviticus 26:44.)

No matter how long and bitter exile may be, the very nature of the Divine Covenant assures the people's survival and return again to the land of their forefathers.

This affirmation of the very mystery of election and the eternity of Israel (albeit explained in terms of Divine fidelity to the covenant and promise to the Patriarchs) is to be found throughout Prophetic literature. But arguably it is most developed in the Book of Isaiah leading to the prophet's interpretation of the "conundrum" of Jewish suffering. I refer to the so-called "suffering servant" passages (42:22-25; 52:13-15; and chapter 53; which of course have such a particular and different significance for Christian Tradition): Isaiah declares that the people of Israel has been covenanted with the Holy One Blessed Be He in order to testify to the latter's very presence

"And you Israel are **my servant**, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham who loved Me" (41:8)"

"..I will give you as a **covenant** of the people, a light of the nations" (42:6) (see also 42:1)

"You are my **witnesses** says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen" (43:10)

"This people I have formed for Myself; they shall declare my praise" (43:21)

These terms are reiterated in the following chapters of Isaiah whereby the prophet affirms that the children of Israel have been ordained as the Divine servant, as His witnesses, to testify to the Divine Presence through their very being; indeed through their very survival.

Accordingly, in the suffering servant passages, Isaiah explains the mystifying degree of hostility towards the Jew and the seeming inexorability of Jewish suffering as follows.

If one has been chosen to testify by one's very existence to the presence of the Godly and goodly - whether one deserves it or not; whether one lives up to it or not; then everything that denies the Godly and the goodly will find your very presence intolerable and thus seek your destruction. Thereby, the Almighty's "suffering servant", bears the brunt of ("takes on" as it were) the sins of those others who deny the Divine Presence and the Divine Way and who therefore direct their hostility at the people of Israel.

However as indicated, the Bible provides the reassurance that Divine fidelity and love will guarantee the eternity of the People of Israel and its eventual triumph over all adversity.

This understanding is expressed by the sages of the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, tractate Yoma 69b; and Jerusalem Talmud, tractate Megillah 3:6) not only as the way to understand the suffering of Israel but as the way to understand the Divine character itself.

"Why were the Men of the Great Assembly (the authoritative body of sages that according to Jewish Tradition was founded by Ezra and was the forerunner of

the Sanhedrin) thus named? Because they restored the (Divine) crown to its former glory.

Moses had declared (the Holy One Blessed Be He, to be) "the Great, the Mighty, and the Awesome" (Deuteronomy 10:17).

Jeremiah came and said 'foreigners (idolaters) are cavorting in his Sanctuary, where are his Awesome deeds?' he did not say "awesome" (Jeremiah 32:18.)

Daniel came and said 'foreigners (idolaters) are subjugating His children, where are His great deeds?' He did not say "great".

They (the Men of the Great Assembly, then) came and said 'on the contrary! This is the greatest of His great deeds, that He restrains His inclination and delays His anger (retribution) to the wicked. And these **are** His awesome deeds, for if it would not be for the awe of the Holy One Blessed Be He, how could one nation succeed in surviving among the nations " (- and indeed in Nehemiah (9:32), the Holy One Blessed Be He is described as "the Great, the Mighty, and the Awesome")

Thus not only the survival of the people of Israel, but also the gift of free will to all people, are seen as a reflection of Divine mercy which is His glory and grandeur.

Sartre and Buber

The most secular and negative reflection of what Rabbi Soloveitchik terms "the Covenant of Fate" of the community, is to be found in the writing of Jean Paul Sartre in his book "Anti-Semite and Jew". Sartre claims that Jews are solely bound by the hostility and disdain of the gentile world and "thus the authentic Jew is the one who asserts his claim (to Jewishness) in the face of the disdain shown towards him" and thereby "the Jew (may) live to the full his condition as a Jew".

However Sartre's concern is not to affirm the desirable continuity of the Jewish community - on the contrary. He states:-

"The authentic Jew is one who thinks of himself as a Jew because the anti-Semite has put him in the situation of a Jew. He is not opposed to assimilation any more than the class-conscious worker is opposed to the liquidation of the classes. The authentic Jew simply renounces for himself an assimilation that is today impossible; he awaits the radical liquidation of anti-Semitism for his children."

Very different, is the logic of the call that the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber uses in his appeal to young Jew, not to abandon their identity in the face of the seductions of the modern world.

"The child, discovering his or her identity, comes to know that he or she is limited in space: the adult, that he or she is unlimited in time. As we discover our identity, our desire for eternity guides our range of vision beyond the span of our own life. Stirred by the awesomeness of eternity, we feel within ourselves the existence of something enduring. We experience it still more keenly, when we envision the line of mothers and father that have led up to us...The People are for us a community of people who were, are and will be a community of the dead, the living and the yet unborn - who, together constitute a unity.

It is this unity that to young people is the foundation of their identity, this identity which is fitted as a link into the great chain. Whatever all the people in this chain have created and will create, they conceive to be the work of their own particular being. Whatever they have experienced and will experience the individual conceives to be his or her own destiny. The past of the People is her or his personal memory, the future of the People his or her personal task. The way of the People is the basis of our understanding of ourselves.

When out of our deepest self-knowledge we have thus affirmed ourselves, when we have said 'yes' to ourselves and to our whole Jewish existence, then our feelings will no longer be the feelings of individuals. Every one of us will feel that we are the people, for we will feel the People within ourselves."

However our modern world is already very different from that which Buber and Sartre knew. Anti-Semitism is definitely not dead; but for Jews in the western world today and in North America in particular; it is not only doubtful whether Sartre's negative definition/imperative of Jewish authenticity will have great appeal; but even Buber's eloquent positive call sounds naïve and will be even more so for future generations.

The Covenant of Yi'ud /Destiny of purpose

As indicated above, Rabbi Soloveitchik contrasts the Covenant of fate, which was made with a slave people with no free will to exercise; with the Covenant of yi'ud /destiny of purpose that was made with a free people which could, and did, make its own choice. The Torah indicates that The Holy One Blessed Be He did not simply impose the Torah on Israel, but offered it to them—via Moses—and received their free positive response (Exodus 19:8).

The offer was to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6); to "be holy as (for) the Lord Your God is Holy" (Leviticus 19:1); thus "to perform all My commandments and you shall be holy to your God" (Numbers 15:41).

Holiness is generated by both Imitatio Dei in our social relations and conduct; and also by the discipline/mastery over our nature, through the observance of the ritual commandments.

These are no less related to memory - on the contrary. But whereas memory in the context of the Covenant of Fate is something passive; in the Covenant of Destiny of purpose, b'rit yi'ud, it is active; it is the inspiration for moral and spiritual values in our daily lives, personally and communally.

In living this Covenant, no longer are we just victims of history; we are active fashioners of our present and future.

Let me quote Rabbi Soloveitchik once more:-

"Destiny(of purpose) in the life of a people, as in the life of an individual, signifies a deliberate and conscious existence that the people has chosen out of its own free will and in which it finds the full realization of its historical being."

Then, our testifying to the Divine presence is no longer a passive act, but an active initiative.

Thus when we are conscious of the fact that we are part of the b'rit yi'ud, Passover rituals for example, not only bind us to the past and to our community, but they inspire our future with the values by which we fashion and lead our lives.

Memory and sanctification are united, as indeed in the Sabbath, which we are commanded to "*remember* to keep holy" and which is linked in the Decalogue both to the Exodus as well as to the Creation.

That memory is also called upon to animate our compassion and responsibility towards one another and especially the vulnerable, the orphan, the widow; and the stranger concerning whom we are told:–

"the stranger you shall not oppress, for you know the soul of the stranger for your were strangers in the Land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9) "The stranger shall be as one of the home born among you and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:34.)

The “downside” of this Covenant of choice, is that the very expectation of the call to holiness; the very choice to live the life of the commandments, have consequences when we fail to live by them. The message of Leviticus (ch.26) and Deuteronomy (ch.28) is echoed by the prophet Amos, “only you have I known (in the sense of revealing the fullness of the Divine word) of all the families of the earth, therefore I will visit all your iniquities upon you.

And in the liturgy of the festival days, we declare “because of our sins we were exiled from our Land.”

It has not only been the aforementioned “mystery of Jewish suffering” that has meant that we are only a tiny fraction of what a people with such historical longevity would have been naturally; there have also always been times and opportunities when Jews could turn their back on the Covenant of purposeful Destiny.

The Divine promise regarding the eternity of Israel has been evidenced always with a “remnant” (see Isaiah 1:9;6:13;17:5-6; Zephaniah 3:12,13.) This promise of Divine fidelity and eventual restoration, is to enable that “remnant” to live in accordance with the Covenant of Destiny (of purpose).

Community and Identity today

There are valiant attempts today to find secular means to nurture memory and identity. These are particularly evident in the proliferation of Holocaust museums around the world. I do not intend, Heaven forbid, to demean the importance of memorializing the victims of this great tragedy and certainly not of the importance of using this memory as a moral, educational tool.

However a sense of historic tragedy let alone victimhood, cannot sustain identity in our modern world for long.

Indeed, museums of an ethnological nature are generally a testimony to the desire to preserve that which is no longer living in a full contemporary sense.

Of course the “game changer” of modern Jewish history is the establishment of the State of Israel. Undeniably Israel serves as the central focus today for the collective Jewish sense of a Covenant of fate.

Paradoxically the Zionist vision that the establishment of a Jewish polity would bring an end to anti-Semitism, has proven to be a sad chimera.

While not suggesting for one minute that all of Israel’s policies are wise, productive or moral; the degree to which Israel is singled out in the international fora, together with the irrational preoccupation and double standards, certainly reinforces the Jewish historical sense of the Covenant of Fate and its lamentable ramifications.

However one day one way, the issue of Israel's presence in the Middle East will be resolved. Can the sense of "Brit Goral" sustain the Jewish community indefinitely in the modern secular world?

As an Orthodox Jew, I am committed to the corpus of halachah - the body of Jewish law that seeks to live in accordance with this b'rit yi'ud – and wish for all Jews to live accordingly. But I would claim that as long as there is an awareness of destiny of purpose, and not simply a sense of imposed fate, then this itself gives meaning to the Covenant of Fate, to shared memory and identity; and thus heralds a vibrant future for the community.

However where modern secularism has undermined a commitment to a Covenant of destiny of purpose, I believe that that Covenant of Fate will inevitably have diminishing validity and attraction. While resurgent anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism give new grist to its mill; I would suggest that these are whirlpools moving against a general tide, as globalization for better and worse takes its inexorable course.

Irish Jewry- an exemplar

One of the remarkable characteristics of the tiny Jewish community of Ireland which in its heyday was never more than some five thousand souls, was of course the strong bonds of community forged by shared history, reinforced by a more recent shared provenance - overwhelmingly from Lithuania.

Undoubtedly the sense of communal solidarity and responsibility in which members of the community were raised, led to the disproportionate and remarkable Jewish contribution to Irish society in science, academia and politics; as well in music, art and society at large.

Nevertheless one wonders whether the Irish national context into which the Jewish community immigrated, might not have also had much to do with it. As opposed to other Christian societies which Jews had entered into in Europe, in which the dominant denominational ethos and power went hand in hand; in Ireland a dominant ethnic and religious ethos was subjugated by colonial rule. As a result, the environment in which the Jewish community established itself, was not one that was seeking to impose itself on others- on the contrary.

It was one that was struggling to preserve its own place under the sun.

I would suggest that this led to a mind set in which believers from other communities could be accepted for what they were – and indeed probably more respected if they were loyal to their own respective tradition.

At any rate, Irish Jewry was both remarkably cohesive (in comparison to other Jewish communities) and remarkably religiously observant - committed to the values and practice of its heritage as well as exemplifying a caring committed community.

This meant that there was more authentically "Jewish life" in a community of a few thousand, than in many other Jewish communities often larger by even scores of thousands. Indeed Irish Jewry invariably gave "outsiders" the impression that it was a community far larger than its actual numbers.

Whereas most of the community's youth - like so many young Christian Irish men and women - set off for other lands in search of greater professional and economic opportunity; Jewish communities around the world, but especially the State of Israel, have been the beneficiaries of a uniquely disproportionate Irish contribution.

Irish Jewry served not only as a resource but as an exemplar for vibrant Jewish life thanks to its dedication to a Jewish heritage that testifies to a higher Destiny.

Indeed a sustainable and creative future for “the remnant of Israel” in our modern world - even in the State of Israel and especially in the Diaspora – depends substantially on the degree to which our sense of identity is generated not just by a shared history; but by the commitment to the values, practice and purpose, drawn from those collective sacred memories, that nurture our faith and can inspire our destiny.