

## Parashat Bo: Memory- Bound

” וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ, בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר:  
 בְּעִבּוּר זֶה, עָשָׂה ה' לִי, בְּצֵאתִי,  
 מִמִּצְרָיִם. ט וְהָיָה לְךָ לְאוֹת עַל-יָדְךָ,  
 וּלְזִכָּרוֹן בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ, לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה תּוֹרַת  
 ה' הֵנָּה, בְּפִיךָ: כִּי בָיַד חֲזָקָה, הוֹצֵאתָ ה'  
 מִמִּצְרָיִם. י וְשָׁמַרְתָּ אֶת-הַחֻקָּה הַזֹּאת,  
 לְמוֹעֲדָהּ, מִיָּמִים, גְּמִימָה.”

" 8 And thou shalt tell thy son in that day, saying: It is because of that which the LORD did for me when I came forth out of Egypt. 9 And it shall be for **a sign unto thee upon thy hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes**, that the law of the LORD may be in thy mouth; for with a strong hand hath the LORD brought thee out of Egypt. 10 Thou shalt therefore keep this ordinance in its season from year to year."



As I was reading through this week's Parasha I noticed a dual narrative, subtle yet undeniably positioned in the Torah text. Almost as if the Torah, moving from one scene to the next and back again, was forcing us to search for the correlation between the two accounts.

The first is a story about a stubborn oppressive dictator, who despite numerous unbearable plagues against his people, refuses to let the subjugated nation free. We are told that his heart was hardened twenty times. The first ten, we are told 'Paroah hardened his own heart', the last ten his heart was hardened by God. His callous and evil mindset successfully manages to forget the suffering he and his people have endured, refusing shortly after each plague, to submit to the will of God to free the Israelites.

The second narrative is of a people on the brink of freedom. Ready and waiting, coats on, belts tied, bags packed, food prepared, anticipating a redemption they have not yet been granted by eating a festive meal.<sup>1</sup> Throughout these preparations, the slaying of the Egyptian God and putting its blood on the doorposts, preparing the unleavened bread and bitter herbs to eat with the sacrificed ram, collecting the gold and silver of their persecutors, Moshe words stand as a repetitive mantra, 'And this day shall be for you as a memorial', 'And you shall observe this thing as an ordinance to you and your sons for ever', 'and you shall tell your sons on that day, this is done because of what the Lord did to me when He took me out of Egypt', 'and it should be a sign upon your hand and a memorial between your eyes'<sup>2</sup>. The message of Moshe is defined by the word 'Zikaron' - memory.

The people are told that this moment must be imprinted on their individual and collective memory, never forgotten, passed down to each generation.

The two narratives are juxtaposed for a reason. One is about a tyrannical leader whose self imposed 'memory loss' results in further suffering and pain for his people. The other is about a God who impresses on

<sup>1</sup> This to me is one of the most powerful images in the exodus narrative. A people commanded to eat a celebratory meal of freedom, before they have been released from freedom. To celebrate redemption before it is given. We have remained a people who are always anticipating redemption, looking forward not back, searching for a better future and working towards a better reality. It begins here at the dawn of our nationhood.

<sup>2</sup> 12:14, 12:17,12:24, 12:42, 13:3, 13:8, 13:10, 13:16

his people the unequivocal act of 'remembering', both the pain of slavery so they are compelled to help others,<sup>3</sup> and the awe of redemption so as to be a willing partner in his covenant.

By hardening Paroah's heart, God is showing that Paroah lacks memory, he reacts to each plague, as if it has been the only one. Paroah does not learn from the past, he does not integrate his experiences and those of his people into his future decision making.

Aaron Wildavsky<sup>4</sup> gives us an insight into the mind of the leaders of slave regimes:

"How can Pharaoh let the Hebrew people go, or keep them for that matter, when he cannot remember anything? Lack of memory is not a random occurrence, it is characteristic of slave regimes, for slaves and masters alike. Having no need to take account of others, masters ape the mentality of their slaves; without responsibility, masters have no need to remember or to teach."

Only after the people leave does Paroah say 'what have we done', the moment he reflects on a past decision, he recognises the error he has made.

In order to appreciate these corresponding narratives one must reflect for a moment on the notion of memory and why it forms such a central theme in the Exodus story.

A slave is a person for whom memory is insignificant. Time has no meaning, one day rolls into the next, one week into the other. Time does not belong to them but to their master. They have no appreciation for time, past, present or future. Memory has no role to play in the life of a slave, for time has no essence. There is no reason to make memories, for there is no one to pass them onto; there is no one to embrace the memories, for the slave lacks an identity and thus barely possesses himself, let alone a life story.

It is for this reason precisely God must teach the people the significance of memory. For as we know it is easy to take people out of exile but much harder to take exile out of people. To move a people from slavery to freedom requires not only the physical transferral of the body but perhaps more importantly the psychological transformation of the mind (more on this next week!). And so God begins with basics. His first command to the people is Rosh Chodesh. He teaches them that time now belongs to them, and hence they must learn to use it for the right purposes. The second and most evident in our parasha, is the lesson of memory and heritage. By repeating countless times the command to 'remember' and 'pass on to your children', God confers on the people perhaps one of the greatest possessions a man and a people can own, and at the same time aids their journey in becoming free people.

Oliver Sacks a well-known Jewish neurologist and author of many books, gives us a profound insight into some devastating neurological diseases such as amnesia and alzheimer's. He writes in his book entitled 'The man who mistook his wife for a Hat' as follows:

*"If we wish to know about a man, we ask "what is his story - his real, inmost story?" - For each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us - through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives - we are each of us unique.*

*To be ourselves we must have ourselves - possess, if need be re-possess, our life stories. We must "recollect" ourselves; recollect the inner drama, the narrative, of ourselves. A man needs such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self."*

The tragedy of any of these neurological ailments is that the person loses his memory, and hence his very identity. For ultimately memories, past and present experiences, form our identity. To 'lose' our memory, is to lose ourselves. Hence to lose our collective memory, by not passing it down to the next generation, is to lose our essence, to forget who we are, and to make null and void our collective identity. As Jacob Neusner, a foremost historian asserts:

*"Civilization hangs suspended, from generation to generation by the gossamer strand of memory. If only one cohort of mothers and fathers fails to convey to it children what it has learned from its parents, then the great chain of learning and wisdom snaps. If the guardians of human knowledge stumble only one time, in their fall collapses the whole edifice of knowledge and understanding."*

<sup>3</sup> Devarim 24

17 לא תטה משפט גר יתום ולא תחבל בגד אלמנה. 18 וזכרת כי עבד היית במצרים ויפדך יהוה אלהיך משם על כן אנכי מצוך לעשות את הדבר הזה. **17** Thou shalt not pervert the justice due to the stranger, or to the fatherless; nor take the widow's raiment to pledge. **18** But thou shalt remember that thou was a bondman in Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee thence; therefore I command thee to do this thing.

(one amongst many verses that couch our obligation to the less fortunate in society in our knowing slavery.)

<sup>4</sup> Aaron Wildavsky: The Nursing Father: Moses as a Political Leader p68

Freedom depends on man's ability to 'remember', both the good and the bad, since remembering without distortion or nostalgia, allows man to make an informed and educated decision.

One cannot read Parashat Bo with all its emphasis on memory and a 'sign on your hand and a memorial between your eyes'<sup>5</sup>, without reflecting on the tragedy and suffering our nation endured in recent history. The imagery of the holocaust, the sign on the arms of the survivors, and the trauma written on the face of its victims, created for us a national 'remembrance' of catastrophe, not of redemption.

Elie Wiesel, the noted writer, theologian and holocaust survivor elucidates poignantly on the imperative of memory, even painful ones:

*" Without memory, our existence would be barren and opaque, like a prison cell into which no light penetrates; like a tomb which rejects the living. If anything can, it is memory that will save humanity. For me, hope without memory is like memory without hope...*

*Stripped of possessions, all human ties severed, the prisoners found themselves in a social and cultural void.*

*"Forget," they were told. "Forget where you came from; forget who you were. Only the present matters." Night after night, seemingly endless processions vanished into the flames, lighting up the sky. Fear dominated the universe. Of course, we could try to forget the past. Why not? Is it not natural for a human being to repress what causes him pain, what causes him shame? Like the body, memory protects its wounds. When day breaks after a sleepless night, one's ghosts must withdraw; the dead are ordered back to their graves. But for the first time in history, we could not bury our dead. We bear their graves within ourselves.*

*For us, forgetting was never an option. Remembering is a noble and necessary act. The call of memory, the call to memory, reaches us from the very dawn of history. No commandment figures so frequently, so insistently, in the Bible. It is incumbent upon us to remember the good we have received, and the evil we have suffered. "*<sup>6</sup>

God's insistence on remembering, not just His saving hand, but also the pain of slavery, is a command incumbent on each Jew, and one that he must pass down to each generation. At times it is not an easy demand, and there is plenty we want to repress. It is not so simple to remember God's 'saving hand', in front of 'burning children', or as the midrash portrays babies buried alive in the pyramids. But that is exactly what God demands we do, to remember the suffering, and the joy of redemption, maybe not at the same moment, for that is surely cognitively and theologically impossible, but to live with the dialectical tension created in the memory of tortured souls and the light of redemption. To imprint in our psyche, and mark on our bodies, the vital task of remembrance. To live in the reality of what Irving Greenberg describes as, 'dialectical faith'<sup>7</sup>, *"Faith is living in the presence of the redeemer even when the world is unredeemed. After Auschwitz faith means there are times when faith is overcome...we know have to speak of 'moment faiths', moments when Redeemer and visions or redemption are present, interspersed with times when the flames and smoke of the burning children blot out faith-though it flickers again...If Treblinka makes human hope an illusion, then the western wall asserts that human dreams are more real than force and facts. Israel's faith is the God of History demands that an unprecedented event of destruction be matched by an unprecedented act of redemption and this has happened.....to deny either pole (nihilism or redemption) in our lifetime is to be cut off from historical Jewish experience. In the incredible dialectical tension between the two we are fated to live.....*

*That this pain will be incorporated in the round of life we regret; yet we may hope that it will not destroy hope but rather strengthen responsibility, will and faith."*

That is what it is to be part of the Jewish people, a people bound by **זכרון**, not just history, but memory, identity, collective hope and despair that comes from reflecting on the past.

We see this dual experience both in recent memory, with the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel, and at the dawn of our nation's collective memory, in this week's Parasha. Our prayer is that the 'moments' of redemption are greater than the memories of suffering and that we are able as a nation to integrate, respond and act on our memories for the sake of our children, grandchildren and the generations to come.

## Shabbat Shalom

<sup>5</sup> Many commentators suggest that the verses describing the sign and memorial are alluding to the mitzvah of tefillin, we are 'bound' by the memory and must remind ourselves of God saving hand every day. (see Rashi, Ramban, Sefer Hachinuch)

<sup>6</sup> 'Hope, Despair and Memory' Nobel Prize Lecture

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg: Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire