

WHAT WE REMEMBER

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah emphasizes to us that the day of Rosh Hashanah is a day of remembrance and of memory. Heaven is able to recall everything and everyone; human beings, less so. Human memory is selective, arbitrary and many if not most times faulty and certainly somewhat inaccurate.

People have often told me that they heard me say such and such in a public lecture and I have no recollection whatsoever of having ever publicly said such an inane sentence. My memory is often faulty and betrays me when I need it. But the hearing of my listeners is often also impaired. People tend to hear whatever they wish to hear even if the speaker never really said those words.

All of this is part of our human condition, our frailties and our mortal nature. And it is a great and truly awesome (how I despise that word as it is used in current society!) experience on Rosh Hashanah to encounter Heaven's perfect memory and ability of total recall.

It is not only that all of our actions and words, thoughts and intentions are remembered and judged, but it is that they are remembered objectively and truthfully without personal prejudice or bias. That makes Rosh Hashanah the "Day of Remembrance." There are human beings that are blessed with great powers of memory. But even they are fallible. Maimonides, one of the great geniuses of memory of all time, admitted that once he could not at first recall the source in the Talmud that would justify a decision that he rendered in his monumental work, Mishneh Torah. If he forgot, then who will not also forget?! Only Heaven is not burdened with forgetfulness.

This leads us to a basic question regarding our memories...what we choose to remember and what we sublimate and choose to forget? The Torah instructs us over and over again not to forget the basic principles of Jewish life - God and the Torah revelation at Sinai, the exodus from Egypt, the sin of slander and gossip, the sanctity of the Sabbath, the continuing enmity of Amalek and much of the non-Jewish world towards the people of Israel, and finally the tendency of the Jews from the time of the Sinai desert till today to anger God by backsliding on obligations and covenantal undertakings.

We have chosen to remember other less important things in life - foolish statements and perceived slights, unimportant statistics and wrong opinions, bruised egos and jealousy of others and their achievements - and have consigned the basic memories that should guide our lives as recounted above to the dustbin of forgetfulness.

Rosh Hashanah demands an accounting of our memory and our forgetfulness. The prophet long ago proclaimed that Israel was unfaithful because "I (God) was forgotten." It is only forgetting that begets

the ignorance of one's heritage, faith and self. And it is that very ignorance that creates the climate of sin and assimilation, secularism and violence, greed and avarice that threatens our very existence as a people and a state. Woe to those who no longer remember, for without awareness of their past, their future is doomed!

On Rosh Hashanah we read in the exalted prayers of the day that there exists, so to speak, a book of remembrances in Heaven - of memory. And in that book, each and every one of us has a page dedicated to our activities and behavior in our life on this earth. Not only that, but our signature and seal appears on that page, attesting to the veracity of what is written there. That page reminds us of what we have forgotten, and whether we willed that forgetfulness or otherwise.

Eventually our true and accurate powers of memory are restored to our souls after we have departed from this earth. And, as the prayer records for us, the page literally speaks for itself, announcing the events and occurrences listed. So the ultimate day of judgment, just as the Rosh Hashanah day of judgment here on earth, is the day of memory and recollection.

Remembering is the true catalyst for repentance and self-improvement. To put it into the current common vernacular, Rosh Hashanah should serve as one's ultimate "selfie." For that attitude of self-appearance is reflective of our fascination to remember and to know ourselves deeply and truly. On the day that everything is remembered in Heaven, we on earth should also strive to remember our past actions, attitudes and behavior.

Chag Sameach Ktiva V'chatima tova Shabbat shalom

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