

Today, I am a fountain pen.

I have to start by acknowledging that Rabbi Teller, the mensch that he is, gave me the hook to my d'var Torah. Credit where credit is due. He said: Memory is dynamic! If I were to tell a story in the company of my mother – something for which she was present; a fellow child's birthday party 25 years ago, perhaps – we would have very different memories of the event. I would remember the piñata, the candy, Drew's new toy that I was quietly coveting. She would remember the schlep through Saturday afternoon traffic, the rumor she heard about Stephanie's dad getting laid off, and the appalling lack of ranch dip for the crudité. As an adult, I feel that my memory would more closely align with my mother's. Memory is dynamic with the passing of time.

The Torah portion we read today was *Parashot Ha'Azinu*, found toward the end of the Book of Deuteronomy. It is an extended prayer-poem given by Moses. The Torah teaches us that Moses recites God's prophetic poem before the people, extolling the divine might and favor

that have blessed Israel to this day. The poem foretells Israel's betrayal of the covenant and God's terrible vengeance. Then God instructs Moses to ascend Har N'vo, to view the land of Eretz C'naan before he dies. The Maftir section in verses 48 - 52 includes final instructions; Moses' charge to the people and God's instructions about Moses' imminent death.

The name for this portion, as in much of the Torah, comes from its first word, "*ha'azinu*," which means "give ear," as a commandment to the listener. Also known as "*Shirat Ha'Azinu*," meaning "song [that begins with] *ha'azinu*," it likely originated as an earlier, independent composition that was later appended to Deuteronomy. Its form and function are similar to works composed by women at the time, often in response to tragedy. Memory is dynamic when women's voices are silenced.

*Ha'Azinu* tells of a relationship gone awry. In last week's portion, *Vayeilech*, God instructs Moses to write down a particular poem and teach it to the people so that it would serve as a "witness," testifying to

God's justice in the face of Israel's wayward behavior. Conventionally, *Ha'Azinu* it exhibits many of the defining features of biblical poetry, including parallelism, terseness, elevated diction, and various forms of repetition and patterning. In the introductory invocation, Moses says, "Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!" This is an example of merism, which uses two extremes to indicate a totality (here they are the realm of creation and the realm of the Divine). In the following lines, we see metaphoric repetition when Moses says, "May my discourse come down as the rain, My speech distill as the dew, Like showers on young growth, Like droplets on the grass."

Recently, I was watching what I consider to be the best show on television, an Amazon original called "Transparent." It's about a broken, fragile ... human ... Jewish family in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America. Rabbi Raquel Fein, who becomes a pivotal character in the narrative arc of the second season, is discussing the Jews' 40 years of wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus. If you look at a map, the distance between

Egypt and the Promised Land isn't that far. I am terrible with directions, but I know I could do it in less than 40 years. But that's not the point.

What she says next is critical: No one who left Egypt as an adult, made it to the Promised Land. Not Moses, not Aaron, not Miriam. That entire generation died out in the wilderness. It took 40 years for the Jews to turn from slaves into the inheritors of the Promised Land. It took 40 years for God to have enough faith in His people that they would – and could – fulfill their end of the covenant, as He was preparing to fulfill His. A new generation had to remember, and keep, the covenant. God, remembering the sins of generations past, had to remind them of their history and the importance of their choices. It didn't take me 40 years – only 18, a holy number – but perhaps God obliged my sense of urgency. Memory is dynamic when we need to change.

Now back to Ha'Azinu. Moses warns the Israelites to “take to heart” all of the Torah and its laws, and to teach the laws to their children: “The Torah is your very life; through it you shall long endure.”

One of the central themes of this portion is the importance of history.

In verse seven, Moses says, “*Zechor yemot olam, Binu shenot dor va-dor,*”

“Remember the days of old, Consider the years of ages past.”

According to modern historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, although

“memory is always problematic, usually deceptive, sometimes

treacherous,” the Torah does not shy away from commanding it, using

different forms of the verb “*zachar,*” meaning “to remember,” 169

times. The people of Israel are commanded to remember and are

warned not to forget. The recital of history, the encounter with

memory, takes place with each ritual.

Rashi believed that one should remember and consider history “in order to be conscious of what may happen in the future.” If we

understand and appreciate the Creation, the Covenant with Abraham,

and the giving of the Torah as examples of God’s power and presence

in human life, we can have faith that God will continue to do what God

has already done. Modern commentator Pinchas Peli writes that

“recalling the past and understanding it help us put events into their

proper focus,” citing Nachman of Bratzlav’s statement that, “In remembering is the secret of redemption.” Peli also argues that knowing about our past provides an important source of constructive pride. It is the means through which we adopt and absorb ethical values and standards into our behavior. Considering and understanding our past provides a proud set of models, guidelines, and goals. Memory is dynamic when we consider the possibilities of the future.

Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, argued that we must study history because we owe it to those who perished and to new generations who will need to know “where they come from, and what their heritage is.” Remembering the past is critical in forming the future. “We need to face the dead, again and again, in order to appease them, perhaps even to seek among them, beyond all contradiction and absurdity, a symbol, a beginning of promise.” Modern philosopher Emil Fackenheim believes that, following the Holocaust, the commandment to remember our history has been added to Jewish practice.

After sunset on Saturday, October 29<sup>th</sup> (27 Tishrei), I will light my first Yahrzeit candle. Earlier this year, as I picked up in the Sanctuary after the Yom HaShoah program, I found a yellow *zachor* card with an unfamiliar name and a very familiar birthdate. His name was Levie Alter, and he was born on October 15, 1886, in The Hague, The Netherlands. He came from a family of seven children. He never married. He died in the Auschwitz concentration camp on October 8, 1942, just one week before his 56<sup>th</sup> birthday. Based on what little we know of him individually - and the enormity of information we have on the time as a whole – he was likely sent directly to the gas chamber due to his age. If I had been born 98 years earlier, knowing what I know now, would I have waited until my 31<sup>st</sup> birthday to become a Jew? An impossible question, to be sure, but memory is dynamic when we have access to privileged information.

For those who may not know, I completed my conversion to Judaism one year ago today (on the Gregorian Calendar). To me, what better way to commemorate that occasion than to read from the

Torah before the community today? Though not related to generations of Jews by birth, by doing and learning, I build my own Jewish past.

Studying, accumulating knowledge about Jewish history, and celebrating the traditions of Jewish life provide a convert with a Jewish memory.

I'm not sure I can fully explain how it felt the first time I entered a synagogue. To put it in the simplest terms, it was magical. From the simple, unpretentious decoration, to the bimah, ark, and ner tamid, the space itself was warm, welcoming, and comfortable. On the first night I met strangers who treated me like an old friend. I sang in an unknown language that didn't feel foreign. I broke bread and drank juice (I was 13) and laughed and celebrated something special. I wasn't quite sure what about this day was special, but I knew it was.

When I lived in New York City, I met with Rabbi Rachel Weiss at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah to discuss studying there for conversion. During our conversation, I explained to her my connection to Judaism and how I had gotten to that point. She shared with me that there is a belief in Judaism that sometimes Jewish souls are born into



non-Jewish bodies, and those who convert are uniting the body and soul. Memory is dynamic when a soul is restless.

For me, studying Jewish history bonds me to a collective memory that reaches back to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel; through Moses and the prophets, poets, philosophers, and Torah commentators. It may sound silly, but when I sat before the beit din, I imagined them there with me, giving their silent but authoritative assent to my acceptance into Am Yisrael. I look forward to every recitation of the first paragraph of the Amidah in hopes of repaying them.

For many of us, remembering and considering the Jewish legacy is a means of recapturing Jewish identity. Lydia Kukoff writes that “It is the means through which a sacred heritage is transfused into the soul.” When I entered the mikveh, I was back in the wilderness, bathing in Miriam’s Well. Memory is dynamic when imagination becomes reality.

I have created a Jewish home for myself, which will hopefully one day include a partner and children who will share my love of and

passion for Judaism. Our Jewish lives give life to Jewish memory, and Jewish history. Our collective memory is an open source, upon which we build, cross-reference, and provide the metaphorical redundancy that ensures accessibility, compatibility, and continuity.

In my studies during the last couple of years, I have found new ways to incorporate Judaism into my daily life. These changes weren't drastic, life-altering changes. They were things that I had already wanted to focus on, and only through Judaism I was able to connect them to a deeper meaning and value that motivated me to make a change. I wanted to make these changes not out of fear for my soul or fear of punishment, but because I want to lead a meaningful life that can be an example for others. Above all, I want to have a rich, meaningful relationship with God.

The best example I can think of is the, for lack of a better representation, capstone project to my conversion process that I worked on with Rabbi Kahn of Congregation Emanu El, called "Challah Back Kitchen". Through this project, I explored aspects of Jewish

history through food traditions, and learned about kashrut, connecting them to the lives, traditions, and values of our ancestors. Beyond my own education, the experience of working on this project helped me connect in new ways with friends who were unfamiliar with Judaism. I hosted dinner parties during which we had lively discussions about the dietary laws, the challenges faced when deciding to keep kosher, and why it's important (to me). I was also able to expose people to new rituals, such as Havdalah, and the blessings over wine and bread. Memory is dynamic when created between friends.

Though I entered the mikveh one year ago today, marking the end of my formal preparation for conversion to Judaism, it was just the beginning of a lifetime of Jewish living and learning. For me, there was never a question of whether or not I would “become a bar mitzvah” in the traditional sense. It was only a matter of when. And though I only jokingly believe that God intervenes directly in the lives of individuals, I have to concede that there might have been some Divine aspect to my 32<sup>nd</sup> birthday, also the one-year anniversary of my conversion, falling on

Shabbat. Today I stand before you and reiterate the words of Ruth:

*“Amecha ami; v'eloheicha elohai,” “Your people will be my people, and your God my God.”*

I have been studying the High Holidays recently, preparing myself for the marathon of which we now find ourselves in the middle. One of the most important themes at this time is the cycle of the year. How it both ends and begins at this moment in the calendar. How Judaism values the energy to start anew that is born from an ending. As I have said, again and again, memory is dynamic. My memory as a child was not the same as my memory as an adult was not the same as my memory as a Jewish adult.

In returning to and keeping with the theme of poetry, I would like to share a poem called “We Stood Together” by Merle Feld. It is told from the perspective of Miriam, prophetess, healer, and sister of Moses and Aaron:

My brother and I were at Sinai  
He kept a journal  
Of what he saw

Of what he heard  
Of what it all meant to him

I wish I had such a record  
Of what happened to me there

It seems like every time I want to write  
I can't  
I'm always holding a baby  
One of my own  
Or one for a friend  
Always holding a baby  
So my hands are never free  
To write things down

And then  
As time passes  
The particulars  
The hard data  
The who what when where why  
Slip away from me  
And all I'm left with is  
the feeling

But feelings are just sounds  
The vowel barking of a mute

My brother is so sure of what he heard  
After all he's got a record of it  
Consonant after consonant after consonant

If we remembered it together  
We could re-create holy time  
Sparks flying

For Miriam and many others present at Sinai, Auschwitz, and anywhere Jews are gathered together, Moses' transmission and its legacies have been limiting. The words of the Torah, so exotic, sometimes confusing, but always rich with emotion and heavy with meaning, continue to influence our lives today. "*Zechor yemot olam, Binu shenot dor va-dor,*" "Remember the days of old, Consider the years of ages past." If we take these words to ear, and to heart, together, we can recreate holy time, sparks flying. We can find our place in the Mosaic lineage. After all, memory is dynamic, and we give life to memory.

Shabbat shalom.