

A pious man who had reached the age of 105 suddenly stopped going to shul. Alarmed by the old gentlemen's absence after so many years of faithful attendance, the Rabbi went to see him.

He found the man in excellent health, so the Rabbi asked, "How come after all these years we don't see you at services anymore?"

The old man looked around and lowered his voice. "I'll tell you, Rabbi," he whispered. "When I got to be 90, I expected God to take me any day. But then I got to be 95, then 100, then 105. So I figured that God is very busy and must've forgotten about me. And I don't want to remind Him."

There are some things that that you'd just as soon forget or have forgotten. What if you really could erase unpleasant memories? Would you? That embarrassing memory when you made a fool of yourself as a party in college? The presentation at work that bombed? The memories that haunt you, that make it difficult to show your face in certain public settings?

It may sound like science fiction, it certainly does to me, but researchers have been able to erase certain memories from mice, and Dr. Hank Greely, director of the center for law and biosciences and professor of genetics at Stanford School of Medicine, predicts that in 10 to 20 years there is "a reasonable chance" that selected memories could be pinpointed and deleted entirely.

The Yikzor service, which is really all about memory, opens with words of the Psalmist, asking *ה' מִה־אָדָם וַיִּדְעֶהוּ בֶן־אָנוּשׁ וַתִּחַשְׁבֶּהוּ* (Psalms 144:3)? Who are we that God knows us, that God considers us? What is it about us that makes us worth knowing?

One thing that separates us from other life on Planet Earth certainly is our ability to remember large amounts of information and share those memories with others. We learn not only by our own experience, but also by the experiences of our parents, grandparents, and teachers. Our identities are formed by our memories and experiences. Two genetically identical individuals will nonetheless become two unique human beings because minor variations in their experiences multiply over time, leading to major variations in their interests and personalities.

If we as human beings are collections of memories, what happens if we begin to erase those memories? In the extreme, we have the near total loss of identity of a person with advanced dementia. Such a person is, from all appearances, reduced to a shell of a self. The identity, the person we know and love, is gone, save brief moments of clarity, all the more tragic because of their fleeting nature.

If we were to erase a memory that is part of our experience, does that somehow reduce us, make us less of who we are? I can imagine that there might be cases in which a strong argument can be made for erasing traumatic memories that continue to cause harm, memories of torture, abuse, severe stress during wartime, and the like. But even in those cases the decision to erase, rather than integrate the memory, should not be made lightly. How often do we find that someone who has experienced a particular type of trauma has dedicated his or her life to fighting against those who inflict that harm. I would be concerned that the routine and widespread erasure of memory would lead to a world in which the truth of George Santayana's aphorism, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," will be seen even more frequently than it is today!

After all, what is teshuvah other than the practice of remembering things that we would rather forget, for the purpose of making changes in the pattern of our lives so we don't repeat the errors?

At some point, the erasure of a memory goes beyond protecting one's mental health from serious trauma to being a convenient way to avoid dealing with events in our less mature youth. An embarrassingly bad date, a presentation gone horribly wrong, a botched recital, and other moments in our lives that we'd rather not remember - there are lessons to be learned in the remembering. The fumbled presentation, which happened because we were not sufficiently prepared, ought to serve as a lesson urging us to pay more attention in the future. The botched recital or the bad date might be a lesson that the awkward moments of our lives -- and everybody has them -- do not need to define us.

But surely there are some memories so horrible that the trauma of not erasing them outweighs the possible benefit at some future point of retaining them. To take an extreme example, memories of traumatic childhood abuse which are known to be associated with certain kinds of mental illness in adults; and the specific set of events, if it may be identified, that is the trigger for post-traumatic stress disorder -- a person suffering long term consequences of this kind of abuse or trauma should be able to choose to erase the memory if that would lead to healing.

This leads to another set of questions that I won't even attempt to answer at this time -- Should a child who suffered abuse have the memories wiped before they are able to manifest in mental illness as an adult? Should soldiers routinely have memories erased upon discharge to avoid the possibility of PTSD? These are serious questions which lie at the heart of the relationship between our memories and our selves.

The historian Yosef Yerushalmi wrote in his seminal work "Zachor," Remember!, that Judaism is rooted in the idea that the way we remember and tell our stories is what keeps the Jewish people alive. Our stories, our collective memories, shape events not in the style of a historian, stringing together events to demonstrate cause and effect, but rather in the style of a theologian, describing meaning in terms of a relationship with God and a plan that contains a beginning and an end to history.

In a sense, it is our ability to remember the good and the bad, the blessings and the curses, which have kept Judaism alive for so many thousands of years.

Sagi Cohen, a restaurant reviewer in the Israeli Haaretz newspaper, wrote:

"[The restaurant owner] uses his memories, stories and history books to recreate moments, institutions, habits, and celebrations and to portray with an artist's hand a living picture of a world that was and is no more. That was and is no more? Not exactly. Because ... this world does exist as long as there is someone who remembers it."

As we speak about a world that once was, but no longer is, kept alive by memories, so too an individual. What is the practice of Yizkor, if not to recreate and keep alive the memory of a loved one?

Isn't this what we do with the memories of those we recall during Yizkor? The people we love still exist in our minds. As long as we remember them, they and their world are still alive. The memories that we bring to mind and the details of the world that we slip back into may be comforting or discomfiting, but part of the point is to recall a lesson that comes from the lives of those we remember. We transport ourselves back to a world populated by the people who gave us

life, the people with whom we were raised, the person with whom we raised a family, a beloved child whose life was cut short. We create a world in our minds which may never existed, in which Grandma Sally and Papa Sol can meet their teenage great grandchildren Sarah and Sol. We create a world in which an absent child married and had children of his own; in which a missing spouse stood beside us to share the joy of a grandchild's wedding and the birth of the next generation.

Yom Kippur is a day when we live on the edge of our mortality. Peering over the abyss, we wear white and fast, symbolic of our status as beings little less than Divine, **וְתַחֲסִיֶּרֶהוּ מְעַט מֵאֵל-לְהִיִּם** (Ps. 8:6). At Yizkor, we peer across the divide that separates us from those whose souls reside in the next world, *olam haba*.

The world we imagine during Yizkor is a world in which we recreate our loved one's Passover Seder, we light their Hanukkah with them, we imagine their journeys from the old country and the hardships they endured building a new life. The lives of the people we remember shape our own lives in ways we both consciously realize and ways we deliberately reject. Our tradition tells us to *zakhor*, Yizkor, remember them today because the ritual of celebrating sacred days collapses past, present, and future and thins the veil between those who came before us and those who are yet to come.

The Jewish ritual of reciting Yizkor is supposed to expand our consciousness. As we are about to begin the Yizkor service in a few moments, here's what I'd like you to do: Focus on one particular memory that you are grateful that you remember, of even just one person that you are remembering today. Put yourself in that memory picture and give it texture. Imagine the details, the sounds, the smells, the taste, the temperature. Bring the memory alive. Now imagine describing that memory to someone else and explaining what it means to you in the form of a vivid story. Stories connect people, which is why the Torah is told as a story, not as a book of law. Your story can become part of the larger Torah, the embodied traditions and stories that bind us one generation to another.

This Yizkor, may you experience the memory of at least one person that was and remains beloved in your life. May that memory and that relationship inspire you to connect with another person important in your life by telling the story. May this Yom Kippur and this Yizkor thus be a link in your personal story, linking your loved ones who have passed on with those whose love you continue to share.