

Dr. Richard Friedman tells the story of a patient of his named Alan, who was in his office on the 81st floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center when the first jet hit the north tower. He remembers the blue sky turning white with a rain of paper and debris. And within minutes, the sight of people jumping to their deaths was burned into his memory. Alan, a chronic worrier, was not reassured when he heard the announcement that his tower was safe and that he should stay put. Instinctively, he fled, running down all 81 flights of stairs. What had been a lifelong liability, his generalized anxiety disorder, had clearly saved his life that morning. His worrying finally paid off.

Most of us who experienced the horrifying events of that day via television and newspapers have been able to put the sickening images out of our everyday awareness. Most of us have been able to do what Alan and many others who were at ground zero have not been able to do — to, in a way, forget.

Alan is flooded by vivid, intrusive memories of that day. Burning odors and crashing sounds bring the scenes back with terrifying clarity, and at these moments Alan has never really left ground zero. Desperate to avoid anything that will set off these memories, Alan has withdrawn from social life.

Most of us can watch jets overhead and walk near ground zero with little anxiety. That's because forgetting is an effortless hard-wired ability; bad memories not associated with trauma fade naturally. Alan cannot easily forget what has happened to him because traumatic memories are processed and encoded in the brain in way different from routine memories. They just don't fade with time. This explains, for example, why you can constantly misplace your keys but never forget that you were in a building hit by an airplane.

In Alan's case, the best way to forget was to remember. In the safety of a therapist's office, he was repeatedly exposed to the images and stimuli that set off his painful memories. Through cognitive-behavioral therapy, the everyday triggers were presented without the trauma, and that process broke the link, depriving the triggers of their power to unleash his fear reaction.

To forget, of course, is not to erase memory; forgotten painful memories remain with us, even if outside our everyday awareness. And forgetting isn't callous or disrespectful. It is healthy because it loosens the grip of painful memory on our conscious minds and allows us to get on with our lives.

I bring you this story because we are about to embark on a journey through three sections of our Yom Kippur service which focus on memory, and Alan's experience can provide wisdom for understanding them. The three sections are:

Yizkor

Avodah, or the service of the Kohen Gadol

Eleh Ezkerah, also called Martyrology

Each, in its way, connects us with parts of our past. Each tries to stress parts of that past which our tradition believes are important to our future. Two of them address memories that might be very painful, even traumatic.

In the Yizkor service, we think about our own personal stories. The older generation may remember Yizkor as an vividly emotional point in the service. Their parents who may or may not have been regular shul-goers, always made it a point to be at Yizkor services. Those in their 50's and younger, however, may not feel this intense emotional attachment to Yizkor. Why is this?

Perhaps, since life expectancy in their parents's and grandparent's generation was not as long, and since the memory of the destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust was relatively fresh, the older generation grew up as children seeing their parents crying and saying Yizkor.

The Boomer generation and beyond grew up in an age when people live longer so as young children we may not have seen our parents saying Yizkor. Because our society is so mobile, we also may not have lived in the same city as our grandparents to see them during Yizkor. As a result, we may never have been shown the same kind of emotional attachment to Yizkor.

Perhaps also memory is not as important as it once was. We remember the past because we want to reproduce the behavior and the values of the previous generation. When we no longer want or need to reproduce that kind of community, we don't make it a point to remember. The decline of Yizkor attendance at times other than Yom Kippur, therefore, may have begun in the early years of immigration to this country, when people rejected the lives they had in the "old country," and embraced America in its place. Our mobile society reinforces this behavior. When we move away from our family to another city, we lose the immediacy of the closeness of extended family and the sense of being rooted generationally in a community.

On a darker side, memories can be a powerful trigger, not only positively but also negatively. Memories can be pleasant, but they can also be painful. Memories can represent enjoyable parts of our past, or they can represent disagreeable aspects of our past that we would rather remove. Yizkor has the potential to bring up negative, or even abusive, memories. In order to free ourselves of this past abused self, a self we probably do not like very much, we might jettison Yizkor as a way to remove the memories of our past that we don't want to experience.

The lesson of Dr. Friedman's patient Alan is that remembering does not mean that we need tie ourselves up with the past. Yizkor may in fact bring up painful, embarrassing, memories that we would prefer to forget. Remembering here, in the safety of this sacred space, is a kind of therapeutic release in which we put those memories in their proper place where they can no longer hurt us. The point of Yizkor is to find meaning by putting our family's stories in their proper place within our own personal narratives.

The next story we tell is of the Avodah service. Why do we tell this story, recreating the sights, sounds, and smells of the service of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur in Temple days? We do so to follow the Rabbinic principle that if we can't do something, we ought at least to talk about it and remember it, so that its value will be preserved.

On September 8, 1908, 6000 people died as Galveston, Texas, was destroyed by Hurricane Isaac. 675,000 people died in the flu epidemic in 1918, 200 times the number of people killed on 9-11. Both of these events are not noted in most of our history books, because in general, stories are remembered only if they have a meaningful ending. [From All things Considered, 9/10, by Robert Smith] We tell the story of the Avodah service because it is part of the fundamental and meaningful story of Judaism. The Temple in Jerusalem was the original sacred space, where human and divine met. Our institutions today are modeled after the Temple. Holiday celebrations, the mitzvot of tzedakah, prayer and Torah reading, are all based on Temple practices. Telling the story of the Avodah service expresses our debt of thanks to our ancestors 2000-3500 years ago.

Finally, during the Martyrology service we tell the stories of those who were martyred, willingly or unwillingly, for a cause. The stories in the Mahzor are of those who gave their lives to teach Torah and those who were murdered in the holocaust. To those, we have added from

year to year those who lost their lives in terror attacks, both here and in Israel. In the past week, I'm sure that many of you were, as I was, absorbed by the stories being told on television, radio, and at special services about the World Trade Center. We bring such stories into the liturgy of our holiest day because we want to learn the lessons of heroism, sacrifice, patriotism, and the danger of extremism. These are potentially traumatic memories, of persecution and terrorism. Again, we turn to Alan's story to learn why we share them on Yom Kippur -- on the most sacred day of the year, in the safety of our most sacred of spaces, we tell the story and share our fears with each other, so that during the rest of the year we can set the memories aside in a safe place in our minds.

Ultimately, memory by itself is not a virtue. It is only what we do with the memories that can make a difference in our lives. I want to conclude with another Hasidic parable:

Whenever a crisis arose for the Jews, the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, would go to a certain place in the forest, light a fire and say a special prayer. A miracle would occur and the crisis would be averted.

In later times, the Baal Shem Tov's disciple, the Maggid of Mezeritch, would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Master of the Universe! I do not know how to light the fire, but I can say the prayer, and that must suffice." And it always did.

In still later times, the Maggid's disciple, Moshe Leib of Sassov, would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Sovereign of the World, I do not know how to light the fire or say the prayer, but I know the place, and that must suffice." And it always did.

When Israel of Rishyn needed intervention from heaven, he would say to God, "I no longer know the place, nor how to light the fire, nor how to say the prayer, but I can tell the story and that must suffice."

And it did.

We tell the stories of Yizkor, of Avodah, and of Martyrology with the hope that the power of the words will help us connect with God and transform our lives. May we be strengthened by the memories of the righteous tzaddikim we now recall, and may their precious memories comfort and sustain us.

Amen.