

Rosh Hashana 5769

Remember Us?

By Student Rabbi Joe Hample 9/30/08

Can you believe it's 5769 already? Where does the time go! It seems like just yesterday it was 5729, the year of Stonewall; or 5732, the year BCC was founded; or 5760, the year the Reform movement endorsed religious marriage for same-gender couples.

Ah yes, the good old days. At my age I do a lot of reminiscing. I was born in 5716, you know. Of course there's something very Jewish about reminiscing. Jewish humor, for example, generally pertains to a bygone era. Chopped liver and my Yiddishe mama don't have much to do with our actual Jewish experience here in the late 58th century. But being Jewish means remembering.

Remembering – and forgetting. Remembering and forgetting go hand in hand. At this point, my brain is more or less full: I have to keep forgetting old knowledge, to make room in my skull for new knowledge. And then there's expressive forgetting: when we tell our personal stories, we have to forget details that don't fit. If I recount my tangled biography, I focus on points that lead toward rabbinical school. I omit my many detours from Judaism, which would make the narrative a little confusing.

The scholar David Roskies wrote a book called *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*, about how expedient our ethnic memory really is. We got tired of the Torah, so we adopted *Fiddler on the Roof* as our national epic instead. *Fiddler on the Roof* is a myth too: it's just a myth that's more attractive to us right now; it positions us as underdogs, which is fashionable these days. In the Torah, yes we were slaves for a little while, but we went on to conquest and supremacy.

Frankly, there's plenty in the Torah we might like to forget. A lot of the Torah is blood and gore, or baffling geography, or suffocating ritual. A lot of the Torah is politically incorrect. And a lot of the Torah is begats: Irad (eye-rad) begat Mehujael (me-hew-jail): and Mehujael begat Methusael (me-thoo-sail): and Methusael begat Lamech (lay-mick). And that's just one verse (Gen. 4:18).

A little more recently, Stu and Amie Hample begat me. But my Jewish memories are a bit problematic. My folks were proud to be Jewish, but they never went to temple if they could help it, even at the High Holidays. There was a mezuzah on the doorpost, and bacon in the fridge. They sent me for a perfunctory religious education: and as you can see, it worked too well. I had to fight for Jewish holidays in my home, and it was an uphill battle.

I couldn't make my family see that Judaism may be complicated, but it's also fun. What other religion blows an animal horn in worship? What a great idea! We should do more stuff like that! Of course, it's not enough to just sound the shofar. Being Jews, we have to

talk about it. Being Jews, we have to explain it in multiple conflicting ways. It means celebration; it means waking up; it means – something about the ram that got sacrificed instead of poor little Isaac. But what did it originally mean?

The primordial theme of this holiday is remembrance. Leviticus defines Rosh Hashanah as shabbaton zichron t'ru'ah, a horn-blowing remembrance holiday (Lev. 23:24). In the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, we still call this festival yom ha-zikkaron, the day of remembering. T'shuvah, repentance, is a kind of remembering: remembering what we've done wrong, or left undone. The word also means returning: returning to our own story, our own principles; that is, remembering our good impulses. Funny how bad things are easier to remember than good things. The paradox of the phone always ringing when you're in the shower is explained by our selective memory. We remember the negative experience. My successes quickly fade into the mental ether, but I recall my failures vividly. I guess we're programmed that way. We have to remember our mistakes so we can learn from them. Better luck next time. Maybe fate, or God, will give us another chance.

Come to think of it, the High Holidays are a time of second chances. A time to let go of those old snafus, clear the decks, and start over with new enthusiasm. It's like that obsolete toy called an Etch-a-Sketch, where you draw all sorts of things, then give the device a good shake and you're back to a blank slate.

Second chances. One of my favorite novels is Saint Maybe by Anne Tyler, about a young man who makes one unkind remark and triggers a chain of family disasters. So he runs out and joins a storefront congregation called The Church of the Second Chance. BCC is the Synagogue of the Second Chance, for those of us who came from less accepting religious backgrounds, or from secular upbringings that left us unfulfilled.

In a few minutes we're going to open up the Torah, and see how God gave Sarah and Abraham a second chance. It reads like the National Enquirer: ninety-year-old woman gives birth; hundred-year-old husband throws wild party. Their advanced age is hyperbole, I suppose; but for those of us who are slogging through rabbinical school in our fifties, the theme of better-late-than-never resonates powerfully. Actually, everyone needs second chances, even young folks, especially young folks. And the High Holidays are all about getting another chance. It's an amazing opportunity we're given at this time of year, amazing. That's why we call 'em Days of Awe. So we're going to read the Torah, and then we're going to blow the shofar. The shofar is also a summons to a second chance. But there's a catch. Before you can get a second chance, you have to remember your first chance. It wouldn't be a second chance if it hadn't been preceded by a first chance!

To get a second chance, we have to be willing to change. A fun fact is that shanah, year, as

in Rosh ha-Shanah, comes from the same root as shinnui, change. A year is a time of change: change of daylight, change of weather, change of life cycles, and just maybe, change of consciousness. We hear all that in the voice of the shofar.

As the most ancient symbol of Rosh Hashanah, the shofar ties us back to the most ancient meaning of Rosh Hashanah: remembrance. A horn-blowing remembrance holiday. And who's the audience for this horn-blowing remembrance? It may be us, or it may be God. Arguably, we sound the shofar as a reminder to God that we're down here. We sound the shofar for the same reason children like to bang drums or blow whistles: to get our Parent's attention.

Of course, once we've got our Parent's attention, we'll need to be on our best behavior. For most of the year Judaism doesn't dwell on themes of sin and death, punishment and repentance. We save it all for this climactic season, because that's when God remembers us. I wouldn't think an omniscient Deity could forget anything, but you never know.

If we want God to remember us, we need to remember God. We need to recall everything God has given us, everything God has provided us. Let's not take the attitude, What have you done for me lately? But while we're reminding ourselves about God, it seems fair to also remind God about us. Where's the harm.

The good news is, God does manage to recollect those troublesome tribespeople. God remembers the folks who want a better life for their families, like Hagar: and you, if your budget is tight. God remembers the folks who want a child, like Abraham and Sarah: and you, if you're craving progeny. It may take the latest technology, or adoption, to make you a parent: and it may never happen for some people; but God does remember us even in our disappointment. God remembers our faults and presumably our virtues. God remembers the dead: that's what Yizkor means, the memorial service we hold on Yom Kippur; Yizkor Elohim, God remembers. God remembers the Covenant: or rather, God forgets the Covenant, and then remembers it again whenever there's a rainbow.

But is that enough? Let's just take a minute to jog the Divine memory. What would we like to remind God of? How much we're hurting. How hard we're trying. How urgently we seek to believe in God, and how difficult it is. How desperately we want to find meaning in Judaism. How deeply we long for Jewish community. How badly we need peace and freedom, justice and economic stability. How anxious we are to save this ailing planet, if only we can figure out how to do it.

Probably God knows all that. God may be old, but I don't think God has senior moments. Just the same, Rosh Hashanah is our occasion to remind God of our hopes and fears, our

dreams and nightmares: to open for God our book of life. When we blow the shofar and look to heaven, we're really saying, Remember us?