

Rosh HaShanah and Memory

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Congregation Bnai Brith, Santa Barbara CA

Shana tova! I find the fundamental premise of this festival problematic.

We teach our children that on Rosh Hashanah we look back and review the past year, but honestly, who does that? It's simply not possible. Way too much has happened over those 365 days, which come to over 6,000 waking hours. 6,000 hours of shopping, cooking, eating, cleaning, emailing, watching television, posting and lurking on Facebook, driving, reading, gardening, waiting in line, worrying, exercising, playing, working..... 6,000 hours....and who can possibly remember and distinguish one hour from the next? Human memory is notoriously unreliable, selective, and subjective.

Here is what happens when I try to think back on the past year. **First**, I draw a complete blank. There's a tiny dotted circle going round and round on the computer screen of my mind. I know that the old year is there, but some part of my mind cannot or does not even want to look at it. Then finally a few huge events rise up and obscure all other remembering. A trip to Israel or the High Sierra. A wedding. A funeral. An argument. A moment of shame or embarrassment. The painful memories are often the most vivid. Six-month or twelve-month old emotions are all still right there, completely ready to come back to life. And when I reach those memories, my first instinct is to stop the remembering, and return to reading my latest email.

If I take a deep breath, and screw up the courage and set aside some real time, I begin to remember more and more. Memories rise to the surface of my consciousness....like the Loch Ness Monster rising up out of the deep.

Here is what rose up when I recently sat down to remember the past year. Our daughter Rachel calling from New York to tell us she and Zach are getting married. And another call, from my sister, saying that my mother fell, broke her hip, and that the surgery had left her completely unresponsive. And sitting in my mom's hospital room, gathered with my family, waiting to see if she would recover. And the first photos from Rwanda of the gorgeous children of the Ubumwe preschool laughing and learning. And scrolling through our Czech Holocaust Torah scroll, and watching the bright black new letters dancing on the two hundred year old parchment. And Marian and I being honored by Hillel and me struggling with my emotions about how exactly I hoped to be honored. And that peaceful Shabbat afternoon at CBB Family Camp, when my friend Nina Gelman Gans was thrown from a horse....leaving her badly injured and facing a long and difficult recovery. And learning to my horror that I had given a sermon that hurt one of our families. And holding our new Shabbat prayer book in my hands for the first time. And 100 members of the Santa Barbara Muslim community joining us, adding their wonderful food to our Sunday Morning Live breakfast. And sitting in a garden in Jerusalem every morning for two weeks studying text with three rabbis who became three close friends. And early every Monday morning praying with our minyan at

the hospital. And saying goodbye to so many good friends -- Al Mintzer, and Jeri Eigner, and Eve Senn, and Kenny Gaynes, and Syd Geiger, and Mark Toscher, and Ruelene Hochman, and Ruth Levine, and Suzy Kaufer, and Dorothy Caplan, and Minna Stone, and Evey Freed. And all year long visiting friends and strangers in pain. And the intense pleasure of our weekly Shabbat morning Torah study. And the wedding of my niece Molly. And finding myself, with my wife Marian, in an alternative universe, deep in the High Sierra, surrounded by dazzling lakes, boisterous waterfalls, towering mountains, rocks alive with personality and a perfect unspoilt wilderness. And returning from the mountains to this loving community, who all wanted to know what we ate, and how we slept, and how we looked and how we seemed, and eager to decide about my beard. Those were a few of the memories that came back to me, after first drawing a total blank and then allowing one memory to lead to another.

All of these memories rise up in no order whatsoever. They crowd each other and jostle for space, and form a chaotic jumble in my mind. There is no storyline. Like soup in a huge pot, memory soup, churning and boiling, bubbling with emotion. What should I do with all this memory? All of it is mine, my life during just the past twelve months....and I have only skimmed the surface. I haven't even mentioned the emotional outbursts, the sullen silences, the tender touches, the raucous laughter, the good music, bad music, dogs barking, gophers in my garden, and a miraculous afternoon of butterflies on a trail on Figueroa Mountain. What shall I do with all of this memory?

I refuse to impose an order upon it. As soon as I begin to turn it into a "story", it no longer feels true. The truth is: **it is soup!** In the depths of my being, all these memories have no order! And to attempt to work on a few of these memories...well, I don't know. Perhaps I can make some promises, to avoid repeating the mistakes, or to try to build on the moments of love. But how many promises should I make? How many vows can I keep and how many will I break?

Today is called "Yom Hazikaron, The Day of Remembering." We will hear that name in a moment at the end of Kiddush, and repeatedly tomorrow morning. In all of the prayers, our prayers we call this day not Rosh Hashanah, but Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Memory. But what are we remembering? And for what purpose?

It's not just the past year. The apples and honey, the shofar, the music, the Hebrew all awaken memories of years past...in my own life, and in older and more distant Jewish worlds. I close my eyes during Avinu Malkenu and I'm a child again, at Temple Brith Kodesh in Rochester NY sitting with my brother and sister between our parents. Hearing the shofar, I close my eyes and return to ancient Israel, or Babylonia, Spain, Poland, Italy, Germany, the Lower East Side of New York, Syria, Iran, Yemen.

The wider I open the gates of memory, the more memories begin to flood my mind...memories of my own past, and of my people's past. At length the emotions become overwhelming. I can't contain them. Love, fear, hope, shame, glory, anger. Sitting, remembering, my heart is bursting. What have we come here to remember, and why?

We have come together to remember it all, everything we can. Not to put it in order, just to bring it to life! Who were we with at Thanksgiving, and lighting candles at Hanukkah and singing on Passover? Whom did we not see? What hurt us in January? And what hurt did we cause in February? What touched us deeply in March and what left us gasping in April? When were we cruel and what did we say, and how did it feel when we saw the power of our words to wound, or to heal? And what did our mother say to us long ago that we have never forgotten, and how did our father seem the last time we saw him? And what did we eat on Rosh Hashanah last year? How about sixty years ago? Apples and honey? Pomegranate seeds with honey? Sticky, sweet taiglach? Honey cake?

We've come together to remember and to wonder at Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son, and to remember how Jewish parents through the ages blessed their children on this New Year evening and then took them to the cemetery to visit the graves of their ancestors. And we remember our own grandparents, living and dead, and how they are alive within us, their voices, their hands, their faces, their personalities.

Tonight we invite the past. The past year, with all of its sins and all the mitzvahs. All the mistakes and all the learningslet them all come. And all the earlier years, all the memory we can summon. We invite it all.

Open your heart wide and fill it with memory, of yesterday, of last year, of your childhood and far far beyond.

Fill it with joy, with sorrow, with love, with bitterness, grief, despair, and delight. Fill your heart. Fill it, fill it....until you feel that you cannot hold any more memory.

Then when your heart is about to burst with all that memory, with all the flooding emotions, come back here tomorrow morning and listen to the cry of the ram's horn. Then let that ancient, piercing cry break your heart open. Let the dam burst and spill all those memories into the ocean of time.

That's what we do with our memories.

That's the way the Jews welcome a New Year.