

Don't Forget to Remember  
Rosh Hashanah 5783, Temple B'nai Abraham  
Rabbi David Z. Vaisberg

There was a time when I loved reality TV. These days, reality is exciting enough that I go to other kinds of television for entertainment. Back in high school, though? I loved it. The big shows were Survivor and Big Brother. In both, participants would perform stunts, competing in ridiculous and even sometimes disgusting exercises. They would get into their relationships, spats, and adventures, all before the public eye. All exciting, all open to the world, and all heavily produced.

Apparently, this was not how reality TV began. I learned from Rabbi Alan Lew, z"l, about an early PBS reality show called *An American Family* that simply documented the life of an actual Santa Barbara family, putting their lives on camera for seven months. Unlike the produced shows that I loved, this show left the story up to the unprepared family. They had no idea what would come.

In the beginning, to their perception and that of the viewers, all was perfect. Everyone saw a great marriage, great children, a great house, and great careers, and the family was proud of everything they thought they were. But to quote Rabbi Lew, as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle teaches, "the act of observation changes what is being observed." In this family's case, the relentless observation uncovered everything that they were ignoring or choosing to forget. For many of us, when something negative happens in our lives or in our relationships, it's often easier and safer to put the issue out of mind, thus avoiding as much pain and discomfort as possible. For this PBS family, putting their lives in front of the camera and 'documenting' the evidence changed everything. They were unable to continue to put things away. For them, the camera brought out undercurrents of infidelity, addiction, and deceit that had been dormant and unexamined. These troubles were never dealt with properly when they happened or at later, perhaps more opportune times. When they were starkly laid out for the world, and the family, to see, they were so damaging that the family crumbled. The couple divorced, one child ran away, and all hearts were broken.

It is normal to forget, to put aside, to avoid emotional, mental, and even spiritual pain. Regardless of whether we wish to acknowledge and deal with the sources of this pain and their aftermaths, we can bet that they *will* resurface. The question is, will we address them on *our* terms? Will we be able to live with them, move through them, and maybe even benefit from these difficult situations and come out ahead, with lessons learned and bridges repaired? Or will they fester under the surface until something triggers them, with disaster in their wake?

When we think about the definition of Rosh HaShanah, we often think of it as the Jewish New Year—it's in the name, after all. Rosh HaShanah? Head of the year. We teach our kids that it's the world's birthday party.

This is not, however, what the Torah has to say about this day. This definition will not come until the later rabbinic period. In the Torah, the New Year—the start of the first month on the calendar, it begins on the first day of Nissan, fifteen days before Passover. The month we are in now, Tishrei, is the seventh month. This first day, Yom T'ruah — a day of loud blasts, also called Yom haZikaron, the day of remembering—it is a precursor. It is a preparation for Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, of self-denial, of cleansing ourselves of the relational, emotional, and spiritual gunk we have accumulated over the past year. Yom Kippur will be our final chance before the gates close at Neilah, to come clean, and today, Rosh Hashanah, this first day, is where we are called to attention, to remember, and get started.

This is where the shofar comes in. This Yom T'ruah is also known as the day of 100 blasts. One hundred times through the day, we blow the shofar. T'kiah, Sh'varim, T'ruah. One long blast, three medium blasts, and nine short blasts. The first, the long one, is described as a call to attention, a reminder, a demand to turn inward. Sh'varim? The broken three? This is the heart breaking, as we once again make ourselves vulnerable and open up. T'ruah? The nine bursts, they are the alarm telling us that it's time to act with this broken heart. And in these blasts are the essence of this holy day.

Don't Forget to Remember  
Rosh Hashanah 5783, Temple B'nai Abraham  
Rabbi David Z. Vaisberg

These past few years, we have done what we needed to protect ourselves and survive. We have encountered so much danger, pain, and anger, and while we've certainly felt the impacts of these moments, most of us have done what we could to put aside and forget, at least, the most intense of these moments. How else could we live normally? Day-to-day functioning, ease, calmness, and joy, often require that we push the suffering aside, that we lessen and forget our pain. Without girding ourselves, thickening our skin, or working to forget, many of us wouldn't be able to stand up, to function, to look after our children, to be present with our loved ones, or to look forward to the next day.

The problem, as we noted before, is that when we don't take the time to process in a healthy manner, to learn from and integrate what we can, and then consciously put the issue aside in a way that is safe and often supported, the trauma returns on *its* terms and can be destructive.

It's often worthwhile to take the time to learn from these events so that they don't happen again. When we actually consider the trauma and loss our children have faced, how much more likely are we to focus on providing them, and all their teachers, with the resources they need to come to a place of learning, growth, and wholeness? When we've just experienced, in person or vicariously, an Antisemitic attack, how much more likely are we to show up and be with fellow Jews at shul? How likely are we finally take time off from work for an extended period to be with family if there was some kind of terrible event that reminded us of how important it is to be together? With the pain of COVID comes the necessity, and urgency, to do whatever we can to protect our loved ones, and all the vulnerable in our community. When we're in the thick of it, and when we go back there in our memories, we act. And with the passing of time, too often do we revert to the status quo, to our usual behaviors.

The brilliance of the Jewish tradition is that it understands this aspect of human nature and steps in where we may not otherwise think to. Judaism understands that we need release valves for the pain of loss, but we also need our lessons from past so that we don't repeat the same

mistakes over and over again. If we're going to go to these places, we ought to do so with support, with safe boundaries, and with the wisdom of thousands of years of life.

To address the pain of loss, Judaism provides times for periodic mourning—yahrzeits and yizkor—to ensure that we come together to remember our loved ones, not by ourselves, but with the scaffolding of family, friends, and the words and ideas of our liturgy. The mourners stand at Kaddish, so that the rest of us will actually know to reach out in support.

For the lessons learned from past events, we have specific days throughout the year. Judaism reminds us of the intense suffering we have experienced through history: on Pesach, our being enslaved for 400 years; on Chanukah, religious persecution; on Tisha B'av, needless hatred, exile, and absolute devastation. It is necessary that we be brought back there periodically, so that we can more easily feel empathy for others going through it. We need to be spurred to ask, are there others facing persecution for creed or affiliation? Are there human beings without a place to live because they cannot return home for one reason or another? Are there people suffering from the effects of slavery? The answer to all these questions is yes, and at so many fixed times throughout the year, Judaism guides us back to that immediacy, so that we may respond in turn before it's too late.

Likewise, the mitzvot and teachings of the Torah retain our collective wisdom, accumulated over the centuries, to remind us of what to do to avoid past mistakes and to live a better life. We know of this wisdom as the mitzvot, or sacred obligations. The great Saadya Gaon taught that all these mitzvot were perfectly logical rules that everyone could come with the learning that comes from life experience. But, we might not all recall these lessons, and some of us might never come to them. Our tradition brings us there to ensure that we're all on the same page. Many of these are simple mitzvot that at the time were revolutionary and based on our actual experiences in the ancient world under troubling ethical systems. They are lessons that we continue to need, because as soon as life gets better for us, we often forget our humble

Don't Forget to Remember  
Rosh Hashanah 5783, Temple B'nai Abraham  
Rabbi David Z. Vaisberg

beginnings. The Torah explicitly warns of this, demanding that we remember what we came from when we will be living the good life in Eretz Yisrael.

Here are a few of these mitzvot that I teach our B'nai Mitzvah students when we begin the D'var Torah process. For one, the prohibition on idolatry in all forms. Though we don't pray to images and statues, how often do we "worship" things like fame, wealth, success, and power? How often do we put these values above things that are truly important, like love, holiness, and life? Or tzedakah: not an opportunity, but the obligation, for *all* of us to look after *all* who have fallen on hard times in our community? This lesson, learned from being entirely vulnerable, is built into the Torah's instructions on how to farm, so that there is food guaranteed for the hungry. In our comfort, we forget, or perhaps we have never experienced food insecurity, so our collective wisdom in Torah comes to remind us. Then there's Shabbat. A mandatory day of rest. We might say, of course we all want to take a weekend. But, how many of us want or feel the need to get in one more hour of work? And how many of us need others to work on our behalf? How many in our society, or even in this room today, don't have the financial luxury of taking that time off? While the book of Exodus commands us to take Shabbat as a day of rest because God once took that day off, the book of Deuteronomy commands us to take it so that all those with less power—our servants, slaves, even our work-animals – those without the real freedom to make this choice for themselves can get at least one day off a week without being penalized for it.

We forget pain, suffering, and vulnerability, and it's good that we can move forward, but we also need to remember, so that we grow and improve. Our tradition remembers for us, and guides us. We show up for the appointed times, like today, because we know that ultimately, we need these sacred moments and their associated teachings. We need to come together and learn and be challenged, and be supported, so that we might face the most positive of outcomes— life for all.

One of the most *essential* of lessons is that at least once a year, at this high holy day season, we have to dig up our buried experiences. The sufferings, the conflicts, the traumas, the errors, the poor choices of the past year. Because, as the PBS family learned the hard way, when we don't address them on our terms, we know what happens. A conflict with a partner? We can apologize now, or it can come out later in a fight with higher stakes. A blunder at work? We can bring it up ourselves, and control the damage, or we can wait for it to come to us and be in far worse trouble. A broken commitment to ourselves, or to God? What does that do to our sense of self-worth, over time? Have we been ignoring social ills or those with needs in the community, or country around us? How long can we turn aside before these problems overtake us, or our children, or theirs?

The shofar calls 100 times, to say, it is time to remember and it is time to act. And guess what? This time, you're not alone. We are not alone.

In a medieval midrash, King David asks how Israel would possibly make atonement without the sacrifices in the ancient Temple. Our tradition answers that each Israelite will join their community and show up before God as a single unit, to open up and make confessions. The Talmud, likewise, teaches us that: "On Rosh Hashanah, all the inhabitants of the earth pass before God together, as it says in the Thirty-third Psalm, "[God] fashions their hearts as one, and discerns all their actions together."<sup>1</sup> For this difficult time, for the challenge of opening up, we get the encouragement, the passion, and support of our community engaging in this effort. Rabbi Lew wrote on this,

"We heal one another by being together. We give each other hope. Now we know for sure—by ourselves, *ain banu ma'asim*, there is nothing we can do. But gathered together as a single indivisible entity, we sense that we do in fact have efficacy as a larger, transcendent spiritual unit, . . . one that includes everyone

<sup>1</sup> BT Rosh Hashanah 16a

Don't Forget to Remember  
Rosh Hashanah 5783, Temple B'nai Abraham  
Rabbi David Z. Vaisberg

who is here, and everyone who is not here, to echo the phrase we always read in the Torah the week before the High Holidays begin—all those who came before us, and all those who are yet to come, all those who are joined in that great stream of spiritual consciousness from which we have been struggling to know God for thousands of years. We now stand in that stream...”<sup>2</sup>

To survive, we must at times forget. But to thrive, on our own and in a community, we must remember, we must learn, and we must continually be challenged to be our best selves. May we make use of our collective memories and wisdom to help us on our journeys. May we never forget that we are in this together, and supporting each other, and may we truly commit to opening ourselves up over these holy days, to find renewal and become whole.

L'shana Tova.

<sup>2</sup> Lew, Alan. This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared (pp. 110-111). Little, Brown and Company. Kindle Edition.