

"AN UNFORGETTABLE DEVAR TORAH"

Memory and forgetfulness are subjects for study by psychologists, neurologists, and cyberneticians. It is for them to learn and explain the "how" of these processes, the mechanisms, the dynamics.

But these themes are also the substance of spiritual life. Many commandments of the Torah refer to remembering and forgetting. We are commanded to remember, amongst other things: the Sabbath; the day we left the Land of Egypt; what the Lord did to Miriam -- and, thus, the teaching that no one is infallible; how we angered the Lord in the desert -- and, therefore, to be aware of our own penchant for ingratitude.

Similarly, there are commandments concerning forgetfulness. Most prominent is the commandment of Shikchah -- that if one has harvested his field and forgotten a corner, he must not return to it but leave that forgotten corner for the poor. Even more paradoxical is a commandment to forget (although it is not worded explicitly in that manner). We must forget grudges, insults, hurt; lo tikom ve'lo titor, "you shall not take revenge, you shall not bear a grudge." Forgetfulness is even considered a blessing.

The Talmud teaches us: gezerah al ha-met sheyishtakeach min ha-lev, "it is ordained that the dead be forgotten from the heart." R. Bachya has pointed out that this is a great blessing, for if man were always to remember the dead, he soon would be laden with such grief that he could not survive emotionally or spiritually.

But most often, and most usual, forgetfulness is regarded as an evil, as a sin. Thus, the Rabbis taught Ha-shokheach davar echad mi-mishnato maaleh alav ha-katuv ke'ilu mitchayev be'nafsho -- if one forgets a single item from his studies, Scripture considers it as if he were guilty with his life.

And, of course, the source of all these commandments is the concluding portion of our Sidra: Zakhor et asher asah lekha Amalek... Lo tishkach. Remember what Amalek, that barbaric and savage tribe, did to you... you shall not forget.

But this commandment not to forget is problematical. After all, everyone forgets. Forgetting is natural, it is part of both our psychological and physiological selves; it is not a volitional or deliberate act. How, then, can the Torah consider it a sin if we forget?

Permit me to recommend to you an answer suggested by R. Yitzchak Meir, the Gerrer Rebbe, known to posterity by the name of his great halakhic work, "Hidushei Ha-Rim." Forgetfulness, he says, often depends upon man. For we are not speaking here of simple recollection of facts, but the kind of forgetfulness that implies the emptying out of the mind, the catharsis of the heart of its most basic spiritual principles, of the very props of its identity. And this kind of shikchah is contingent upon ga'avah; it is a forgetfulness which has its roots in man's arrogance.

When a man's mind is preoccupied with himself, he has little place for what is really important -- and he forgets it. Hence we read (Deut. 8:14): Ve'ram levavekhah ve'shakhachtah et Hashem Elokekha ha-motziakha me'eretz mitzrayim mi-bet avadim. "And thy heart shall be lifted up, and thou wilt forget the Lord thy God who taketh thee out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of slaves."

Similarly, we are commanded to remember and not to forget Amalek. Now, the numerical value of the Hebrew word Amalek is 240 -- the very same numerical value as the word ram, the heart being lifted, raised, exalted, supercilious! When man is filled with conceit, he falters and forgets.

Too much ego results in too little memory. An absent mind is the result of a swelled head. A high demeanor results in a low recall. If ram, you will forget Amalek. It is the arithmetic of mind and character.

Indeed this is a human, if not a specifically Jewish, weakness. Rav Kook has taught us that the root of all evils is that we forget who we are, our higher selves. We turn cynical and act as if man is only an amalgam of base drives, of ego-satisfactions, of sexual and material grasping. We forget that, in addition, man is capable of noble action, of sublime sentiment, of self-sacrifice. When we forget that, we are in desperate trouble.

Most Jews who assimilate today, ^{so} unlike those of the early and middle parts of this century, do not primarily because of self-hatred, but because of a massive act of ethnic forgetfulness. And such national absent-mindedness, of forgetting our higher identity, is often the result of ve'ram levavekha. Our memory is weakened by excessive affluence and too much self-confidence. We American Jews act as if our liberties and successes are self-evidently our right. We act as if our good fortune is deserved. And so ve'ram levavekhah leads to ve'shakhachta. And what do we most often forget? -- Amalek!

I read recently that a Swedish gentile woman, who has several times been proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize because of the hundreds of Jews she saved during the Nazi occupation, said in an interview that only once in her life did she entertain hatred for a fleeting moment. It occurred during a visit she paid to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum, in Jerusalem. She noticed an American Jew who was there, and who said to the guide: "I don't understand why they didn't fight? Why weren't they real men?" She was seized with anger, and said to him: "You look fat and prosperous! Have you ever been hungry a day in your life? Do you have any idea what it is like to be starved almost to insanity, surrounded by powerful enemies, aware that no one in the world cares for you -- and you have the unmitigated nerve to ask that question?"

I confess that in reading the interview, I shared her hatred -- but only for a fleeting moment. One cannot hate fools. One can only have contempt for them.

Certainly, we are subject to that weakness of forgetting time and again. Only a year ago Israelis -- and Jews throughout the world -- were afflicted by over-confidence, and the Yom Kippur War was the result. I should hope that we Jews are bright enough to have learned from this experience.

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Most important, one of the things we never dare to forget is the contemporary Amalek, the Holocaust. The news that the younger generation of Germans does not want to be reminded of it, that they feel they did not participate in it, comes as no surprise to me. But Jews must never fall into the trap of ve'ram levavekha and so forget Amalek. Remember and do not forget! The Holocaust must constantly become part of our education, commemoration, and motivation for further study and spiritual development.

Conversely too, if we remember Amalek, that will lead to a realistic assessment of ourselves, and we shall be able to avoid the pitfall of a "lifted heart."

The United States and all the Western World are today in the doldrums. We are all of us in a pessimistic mood about the economy, something which affects each and everyone of us. If the Lord helps, and we all escape economic disaster -- if it will be, as we say in Yiddish "פֿאַר אַן אַרבעט" -- then perhaps we will have learned to rid ourselves of the cultural and psychological and moral signs of decadence in our culture, all these corruptions the result of ve'ram levavekha, over-confidence inspired by affluence.

So, the Hidushei Ha-Rim has given us an unforgettable Devar Torah about forgetfulness and arrogance.

It is a lesson worthy of our deep thought and meditation.

Remember it, do not forget.