

"CREATIVE NOSTALGIA"

Passover is the season of memories. Its whole purpose is לזכור, to bring back the memory of the exodus from Egypt. We remember the splitting of the Red Sea, especially on these last days of the festival. At the Seder, we have symbols that recall to us slavery -- such as the bitter herbs and the matzah which is interpreted as "bread of affliction," and symbols which remind us of freedom -- such as the inclining whilst eating, and the four cups. Various items are זכור למקדש, in memory of the Temple, such as the first time we wash our hands at the Seder, and the sandwich of matzah and bitter herbs. And, finally, the Yizkor, which we shall shortly recite, is an intimate experience of recollection.

In this sense, Passover is quintessentially Jewish. So very much of Judaism is the act of recollection. Beginning with Rosh Hashanah, where we emphasize זכרונות or God's memories, through Purim and the commandment of זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק ("remember what Amalek did unto thee") and, as we mentioned, Passover, life seems to be a process of historical reminiscences.

Most of these memories are accompanied by and expressed through nostalgia -- not just recollection in the sense of conjuring up mental images of facts, objects, and events, but also the experience of yearning, of longing; there is an element of love, sometimes in travail and sadness.

Such nostalgia can be fruitful, especially for a generation that is rootless, that worships the "now," that is unconscious of or deliberately ignores the past, that suffers from what has been called "future shock." For such a generation, Jewish nostalgia can be a link to the past. To some extent, it may serve as a countervailing force against the American and Western tendency to worship newness and novelty.

Interestingly, nostalgia has become very much an "in thing." Notice the tawdry, sentimental, over-idealized romanticization of the Shtetl, as expressed mostly in the popularity of "Fiddler on the Roof." Now we have super-expensive movies that look back nostalgically on the decadent opulence of the 1920's. Indeed, it can be overdone -- witness the recent spate of articles of about 22-23-24 year olds who reminisce nostalgically about the 1960's when they wrecked campuses and burned deans' offices in the name of idealism.

For a Jew, nostalgia makes theological sense. We are a people of the Covenant, and the Covenant between God and Israel describes and informs all of Jewish history and thought. When we do not remember the Covenant, we cut ourselves off from Jewish vitality and meaning. Recalling the Covenant is a religious act of the first order: it means that our loyalty has been affirmed, and that we remain Jews.

However, nostalgia is often a dead-end road. We tend to choke on our tears, to be paralyzed by nostalgic over-indulgence that borders on self-pity, that has too much bathos and too little pathos, too much sentiment and too little soul.

Jews must know that the Covenant is important not only as a past event which must be remembered, but as a definition of a relationship which must be implemented and perpetuated. The Covenant happened in the past, but it must govern the present and determine the future. And so, we must move past ordinary nostalgia, beyond mere sentimental recollection, to creative nostalgia; to re-creation rather than mere recollection.

The climax of the Haggadah is really the articulation of the idea of Creative Nostalgia.

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם  
לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא  
ממצרים... בעבור זה עשה ה' לי  
וצאתי ממצרים... לא את  
אבותינו בלבד גאל הקב"ה  
אלא אף אותנו גאל עמם

In every generation a man must visualize himself as if he himself went out of Egypt... "It is because of this that the Lord hath done unto me when I left Egypt"... For not only our ancestors alone did the Holy One redeem from Egypt, but He redeemed us along with them.

This implies no ordinary nostalgia. Here we have the expression of truly Creative Nostalgia.

How does one go about achieving such Creative Nostalgia? There are three ways. Psychologically, by mentally erasing the intervening years, by bridging the gap of time, by reprojecting one's self empathetically into the past. It requires what might be called de-historicization, looking upon the past not as scholars, but emotionally participating in it as if it were a living event. Intellectually, one must do the reverse, and try to understand the past as a part of the context of history, analyzing it perceptively. Finally, having felt through the past, and understood it intellectually, we must practically and existentially use the past, by resolving to change and grow into the future on the basis of the lessons of the past. When we have done these three things we have moved beyond ordinary to the creative and redemptive forms of nostalgia.

For example, the Sephirah weeks are known as a period of semi-mourning. Tradition tells us that during this time 24,000 (or 24,000 pairs) of the disciples of the famous R. Akiva were killed by a plague. This came at a crucial time in Jewish history, just as R. Akiva was sponsoring the great Bar Kochba rebellion against the Roman tyrant. Now, if we indulge in ordinary nostalgia, we must remember what has happened, feel sorry for the victims, and then refrain from weddings and haircuts and music and theatre for about one month. But if we are to practice Creative Nostalgia, then we must go much deeper. Psychologically, we must try to feel the impact of the loss of so many scholars by transferring that event to our own days. Then we will be able to appreciate poignantly the tragedy of Jewish life which is deluged with Jewish illiteracy and ignorance, when life could have been so much more vital and meaningful had we been blessed with more scholars. This painful pinch, this prick of grief at our own condition, is an act of creative nostalgia for the past. Then, intellectually, we must inquire why this happened. Here we return to the same tradition which is the source of the original information. This tradition tells us that they perished

שלא היו בלב אחד לרבם ולא נהגו כבוד זה בזה

because "they were not as one heart with their teacher and they did not act respectfully one to the other." The terrible divine decree came because their orientation to their teacher, the immortal R. Akiva, was less than perfect, and because they did not honor each other. Finally, we must ask what we are going to do with this information in our lives. And the answer is, that we must make it possible for our community to develop

more תלמיד חכם and reemerge from the vast Jewish ignorance which characterizes our life to one of greater literacy and understanding. It means that we must learn the lesson of how to express affection and love for גדולי ישראל, for great Jews. It means that even when we disagree with the communal decisions of eminent Torah personalities, we must do so with sensitivity and respect and never with annoyance or chutzpah. In the political context of the State of Israel today, when the Old Guard of leaders seems to be on the way out in the process of internal change that is taking place, we must be extremely careful never to over-state the case against Jews who have made immortal contributions to the State and the people of Israel, but whom events have proved to be flawed and merely mortal. Jews must never be ungrateful to those whom they hailed in their hour of glory. We must learn the principle of כבוד זה בזה, mutual respect amongst all Jews, of muting the harshness of criticism and trying to understand each other with a bit of love and honor.

Another example is the Yizkor which will shortly be recited. Yizkor is so appropriate to nostalgia, a word compounded from two Greek roots, nostos and algos, "return" and "pain." Yizkor is a nostalgic experience; it is a time of painful remembering, of indulgence in bitter-sweet memories. At Yizkor we are overtaken with nostalgia as we perform a kind of "sephirah" of the years, as each Yizkorand yahrzeit ticks off another year since the death of loved ones, and re-awakens at each count the eternal flame that stays alive in the embers of old loves, as we review childhood scenes both beautiful and sad.

However, Yizkor must never remain in the category of ordinary nostalgia. Mere nostalgia is simply inadequate because it threatens to be reduced to a stale review of the same memories which weaken with the years. For we must begrudgingly acknowledge that as time itself pulls us away from the nexus of love-relationships, their emotional impact is diminished. With time, we lose the vision of the uniqueness of those whom we remember. Eventually, the psychological element subtly transforms into a philosophical attitude, and we come to view those we memorialize, and ourselves as well, as simply passive agents in the blind perpetuation of the species, as if all of life was but a meaningless link in almost endless chain of biological continuity. But if that is so, then we are really no different from animals!

Creative nostalgia means the salvaging from the past of what was noble and beautiful and holy, by trying to perceive



what was unique and creative, and building on it. In one word, the Creative Nostalgia in Yizkor must lead us to surpass the past.

In this sense I must, surprisingly (even to myself), disagree with a dictum of the Rabbis. The Sages told us  
לעולם יאמר אדם חתני "גידעו מעשי למעשי אבותי"  
"a man must always say to himself: when will my deeds equal those of my parents or ancestors?"

Once upon a time, in the days of the Sages and until quite recently, that statement was not only adequate but a moral imperative of the first order of importance. But no more! Unfortunately, it is no longer true.

If we are no better than the last generation of Jews, we may Heaven forbid become the last generation of Jews. We can't be as good as they were. We have got to be much better.

I remember delivering my first Yizkor sermon as a young rabbi. Coming from the intensely Jewish background that I do, and having been raised in a special kind of Jewish home, I appealed to the congregation to resolve to live up to the example set for them by their sainted parents. After the service, a fine gentleman approached me and very discreetly said to me the following: "Rabbi, perhaps you ought to rethink your approach to your congregation. You want us to live up to the models set for us by our parents. Well, I just said Yizkor for my father, whom I loved very deeply. But he was a man who never observed the Sabbath, was almost illiterate Jewishly, and never came to the synagogue except to say Yizkor for his parents. Is that the model you wish me to emulate?"

Creative Nostalgia means, today, that each one of us must outdo his parents. Redemptive nostalgia means that we must fulfill the rabbinic requirement of תתים חסדנים על המתים, the living must redeem the dead. We must give "nachas" retroactively to parents and grandparents by surpassing them. Of course, healthy-minded parents know that there is no greater joy and pride and "nachas" than when their children exceed them. The Rabbis taught:

אין האב מתקנה לבנו ואין הרב מתקנה בתלמידו  
A father is never jealous of his son and a teacher never envious of his student. It is a sign of authentic parenthood and genuine teaching when one does not begrudge greater success to a child or pupil.

I am distressed at the kind of parents who want their children to do better than they do in every area of life. They already have an estate building for a child before he can read numbers, his college education is taken care of, much of his life planned for him -- all in order to give him what his parents did not have, and make him better than they were. The only area in which they balk is -- Judaism! Here their attitude is -- if it was good enough for me, it is good enough for him. Here they want not progress and growth, but the status quo.

I even know parents -- and this is, of course, not true of members of this congregation -- who will not object with any great vigor to a child intermarrying or turning to Zen or going on to dope, but will react almost hysterically if a child surpasses them Jewishly by observing the Sabbath or insisting upon kashrut or putting on tefillin or studying the Torah. Then they will rush him or her to a psychiatrist, threaten to disinherit the child, and pick up the telephone to excoriate the rabbi for having sown such dissension in their home.

I understand, I believe, the psychological mechanism of such weird reaction: there is guilt, invalidiation, a feeling of inadequacy at having dealt with every area of life except that which counts most and which questions us most. I might even forgive such people. But I could never condone such an attitude. And if I mention this at all to my congregation, it is only because in this world of disintegration and constant change and inner hollowness, we must keep an eye on what is happening at two removes from us, and learn the lessons very quickly for our own families.

So a truly creative and redemptive nostalgia means to promise our parents and grandparents that we will try to have children who are better human beings and Jews than we are; and grandchildren who are better human beings and Jews than they were!

I have spoken of the two levels of nostalgia as an aspect of the Covenant. But the Covenant is a statement of historical mutuality between God and Israel. And if this Covenant summons us to rise to Creative Nostalgia, then that same Covenant also obligates God to analogous achievements.

Indeed, the prophets speak of God as experiencing nostalgia!

In the words of Jeremiah, for instance, God addresses Israel as a husband who loved his wife when they were young and happy, but who has suffered terrible agonies of separation, disloyalty, and strife, and now is reunited with her. God says to Israel:

כִּי אָמַר ה' דְּבַרְתִּי לָךְ חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ אֶהְבֵּת כִּלְיוֹתֶיךָ  
כִּכְרֶיךָ אַחֲרֵי בְּמַדְבָּר בְּאַרְצָא לֹא זְדוּעָה

"I remember (nostalgically!) the grace of your youth, our love during our early marriage, how you followed Me through the wilderness in a land which was not sown." Or, sometimes God speaks to us with the nostalgia of a father who loves his young son; the son later betrayed him and went into strange and terrible paths, and later a spark of the possibility of reunion arises. So God, our Father, speaks to us:

הִבֵּן יִקְרֶה לִי אֶפְרַיִם אִם יֶלֶד שְׁעָשׂוּעִים כִּי מַדִּי  
דְּבַר בּוֹ זָכוֹר אוֹזְכְּרֵנוּ עוֹד עַל כֵּן הָמוּ מֵעַי  
לוֹ רַחֵם אֶרְחָמֵנוּ נְאוּם ה'

"Is not Ephraim (i.e., Israel) a darling son, a delightful child? For as I speak of him I well remember him, as My heart yearns for him, therefore shall I love him again."

So, indeed, the Lord experiences nostalgia. But even as the Covenant challenges us to rise to a yet greater form of nostalgia, the creative variety, so do we, humbly and respectfully, summon the Almighty to implement not only ordinary nostalgia, but the redemptive kind as well. As we say "דְּבַר אֱלֹקִים", "let God remember," we urge Him on to the memory that will reveal His redemptive nostalgia. And that means -- redemption, salvation of His people, the coming of the Messiah himself about whom we read in today's Haftorah.

Our God and God of our fathers; the time has come

יְעֹלֶה וְיָבֹא ... זְכוֹרֵנוּ וּפְקֻדוֹתֵינוּ וְזִכְרוֹן אֲבוֹתֵינוּ

to experience once again beautiful nostalgia as You remember us and our ancestors -- but much more important,

וְזִכְרוֹן מַשִּׁיחַ בֶּן דָּוִד עֲבָדְךָ וְזִכְרוֹן יְרוּשָׁלַיִם עִיר קְדֻשָּׁךְ...  
בֵּינָם חַג הַמַּצּוֹת הַזֶּה

on this festival of Passover, remember as well Your promise to bring Messiah, and redeem us and especially watch our Jerusalem in these hours of Israel's crises and anguish --

have pity on us and save us, redeem us --  
כִּי אֱלֹהֵינוּ אַתָּה, for You are a God who not only remembers, but practices mercy and compassion.

You are a God who is creatively and redemptively nostalgic.