



Educational Web Kit – Israel's 70th Year of Independence

Memory

My Jewish Story

What is the Hebrew word for History – Historia. We have no word. We use the Greek. What are the Hebrew terms we have?

Two options – Toldot – בן-אברהם יצחק, ואלה תולדות יצחק, Generations.

Zichronot – Memory. Think of examples of this. Yizchor, Zicharon. L'zichor is the most important verb in the Jewish tradition.

What is the difference between History and Memory?

History is outside of us. Or maybe we are outside of it. We are distant from it. We can't impact it or change it. It was, It is past. In fact the ideal historian must take himself outside, be neutral in order to correctly assess it. We seek neutrality from our historians. Of history we ask "What did this event mean"

But memory we are inside. We own it, we change it, and it changes us. Memory belongs to us in a far more intimate way. We don't ask 'What did it mean' but 'What does it mean.' You know how sometimes you have a memory and you aren't sure whether you really remember it, or whether you have just been told the story so many times it has become part of your memory.

Being a Jew – a part of the Jewish people – is to open up ones personal mind, ones own story and to include it in the collective, national memory of the Jewish people. On a national level we live by collective memory – we break a glass at a wedding, we sit together at seder night and we share these experiences with the entire Jewish people.

But our own place in this national collective memory is also determined by our own individual stories. The personal stories we tell our selves about ourselves. When we break down our national stories we see that they are really made up of lots of individual stories - Two brothers, sibling rivalry, a birthright and some soup.

What are the key events in your life that bring you to the person you are today.

When constructing our identity – our sense of self – we draw from three principle sources.

- Childhood – the home we grew up in





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- School – what happened to us in our education or peer experiences
- The autonomous decisions we make as independent adults.

When I ask you who you are you can say 'tall/short/student/lawyer/left wing/Jewish/German/Russian etc.) These are all descriptive words but they don't really tell me who you are. For that we need stories. How powerful would Avraham's teachings be, if they weren't accompanied by the stories of Avraham's life, that told us about the man. Our stories help us understand ourselves and each other. Of course this applies broadly and also in our Jewish identity.

In the Jewish tradition stories have played an important role. The Bible is made up of laws certainly, but the strongest motif – especially in the book of Bereshit – is the story. Midrash is interpretation through stories, we have Chassidic stories, Yiddish stories. There is even a name for the person who tells stories. We call him a *maggid*.

the famous hasidic leader, the Seer of Lublin, told how he once passed by a synagogue from which shone a supernal light. He thought, "Certainly, there are great scholars inside, studying the Torah in holiness." But when he entered, he saw two ordinary hasidim, not studying Torah but sitting and conversing. He asked them, "Friends, what are you talking about?" The hasidim answered, "We are telling stories about the deeds of the tzaddikim." When he heard that, the Seer was very moved, for he realized that their storytelling produced the same divine light and illumination as does Torah study

In small groups – each person should share a story of a key event or experience from their childhood.

Guidelines to listening - No interruptions. No questions.

- What are the common themes of our stories? Give examples from the stories we told.
- Are these the same themes if we were telling our adult stories? Would someone like to share an adult story in these themes? Are there other themes that we should add?

Berl Katznelson talked about human being's capacity for memory and forgetting. We need both of these he explains. Memory preserves our culture, our consciousness, our spirituality. Forgetting allows us to forge our own new paths, and seek our own solutions to our challenges.

Man is endowed with two faculties: memory and forgetting. We cannot live without both. Were only memory to exist, then we would be crushed beneath its burden and would become slaves to our memories, to our ancestry. Our physiognomy would then be a mere copy of preceding





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generations. And were we ruled entirely by forgetting, what place would there be for culture, science, self-consciousness, and spiritual life?

- What are the stories we want to remember?
- What are the stories we want to forget?

Conclusion

A hasidic story tells that once, to save the life of a sick boy, the Baal Shem Tov went into the forest, attached a candle to a tree and performed other mystical actions and meditations, and he saved the boy, with the help of God. After the Baal Shem Tov's passing, there was a similar matter with his disciple and successor, the Maggid of Mezritch. He said, "I don't know the mystical meditations the Baal Shem Tov used, but I'll simply act, and God will help." So he lit the candle in the forest and performed the other mystical actions, and his deeds were acceptable on high and had the desired effect. In the next generation, there was a similar matter with Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov, a disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch. He said, 'I don't even know how to do what is necessary, but I'll just tell the story of what the Baal Shem Tov did, and God will help.' And so it was, with God's help.

Our ability to tell our own stories – to create together, though our individual stories, a patchwork that makes up collective memory – is one of the things that has sustained us as a Jewish people. Not merely a collection of individuals but a Jewish people with a shared memory.

