



Yom Kippur 2008 – Discussion Topic

**“MEMORY AND REMEMBERING:
OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND OURSELVES”**

Memory: Why Bother and Who is in Charge?
by Elyse Pivnick

Our family visited the Louvre this summer and we dutifully made sure we saw the museum’s “greatest hits”...one of these is the Wings of Samothrace—certainly the most glorious set of wings on a woman, on a ship, you’ve ever seen—the gestures, the majesty. Historians believe it was carved to thank the gods and to commemorate a naval victory around 190 BC. It must have been some war!

Later, I happened to be in DC and visited the Vietnam memorial—safe to say that I was left with a different feeling---sober, melancholy, and with thoughts of the Iraq war. I thought about our many soldiers with post-traumatic stress---living with memories they cannot erase.

I have a friend who visited multiple concentration camp sites in Poland recently, as an art historian studying memorials. Much to her own surprise, she told me that she never felt so connected to her Jewish heritage and that she felt a deep responsibility—“to remember”—to make sure that the hideous culture of annihilation and Nazi secrecy was broken.

I know a person whose holocaust survivor mother died recently. He was compelled to travel back to Germany to learn more about her early years because there was something missing in him. Until he was able to fill in the gaps of *her* personal history—*his* history was not complete.

I know someone who always feels the world has done her wrong. The memories that frame her life are, “woe is me”, “no one has problems like me” and, no surprise, she always feels the victim.

I also know someone who always looked forward to High Holiday services to hear the rabbi’s sermons. Yes, you heard right...looked *forward* to the rabbi’s sermons. And who watched people take notes, laugh and cry over the advice and inspiration from the rabbi. This last memory is mine of attending services led by my uncle, Rabbi Sherwin Wine. As many of you may know, he died over a year ago in a terrible accident. I have wonderful memories of him from this time of year. The High Holidays with my uncle were a time to think about how you led your life, to make improvements, and he was a great guide.

So, we all have memories whether we like them or not. There are the personal, private memories, there are the memories of where we belong and whom we belong to, there are good and bad memories. For a good life, we learn to live with all of them.

Our memories do not exist in a vacuum. They are influenced by the culture in which we live, the groups we belong to and by our own personalities. Memories can hurt us and restore us. While you might think memory is about the past---it is really a process that is all about the present.

Memory shapes our identity, and it makes sense out of our lives, it is the basis of shared experience, the basis of belonging.

Let me first talk about cultural memory

I think the reason many of us are here today is to express our connection to the Jewish people—or perhaps to pass this memory onto our children. We may not be participating in traditional prayer, but we are participating in the Jewish culture that includes marking this day as a “High Holiday.”

Most of us here today are Jewish, or love somebody that is Jewish, and it is important to understand and affirm this group we belong to. It helps us feel whole to know where we came from and who our people are.

So how do we do this? As a start, my guess is we are about to find out that we have many memories in common. Many of us grew up in a Jewish home that honored the Jewish calendar of holidays. Maybe like me, you went to Hebrew or Sunday school, belonged to a Jewish congregation, went to services, attended bar and bat mitzvahs, heard Hebrew prayers, and probably lived in close proximity to a lot of other Jews.

Maybe, like me, there were family dinners and you ate pot-roast on Rosh Hashanah, bagels and cream cheese on Sunday, matzoh on Passover and latkes on Hanukah. Maybe you heard stories of Europe from your parents or grandparents, and heard a lot about Hitler and the holocaust. Maybe you had parents who always pointed out when Jewish people were in the news---heroic, successful, Nobel prize winners ---or there was a lot of head shaking and worry when we were crooks.

Maybe you know Jewish songs and danced the hora. Maybe you loved the Jewish comedians, entertainers and writers and took pride in their accomplishments. Maybe one of your memories is your parents telling you how smart the Jewish people were, and while you knew it was ridiculous to say we were ALL smart, you were proud of your people. Maybe your family talked a lot about your education and bragged about you—or worried about you. Maybe you experienced Jewish people that were too loud and always interrupted ---well, they were part of the tribe, too.

Let me digress: Did anyone else here watch the Jon Stewart correspondent interview with the voters in FL?---did you cringe at the end when the woman made the rude comment about Michelle Obama? Did you say to yourself, Jon, do you have to show all members of the Jewish Tribe on national TV—I felt that, but I also somehow felt I knew everyone in the group, and despite their behavior, I loved them.

Maybe you grew up knowing that your people lived in Israel thousands of years ago, and that they were brave and strong. Maybe you heard a lot about anti-Semitism. And, like me, maybe you heard a lot about how the family came to America and established themselves here. And how many of you have a family member that worked in the garment industry.

These are our Jewish stories, our rituals, our culture, our memories. These kind of shared stories and experiences--- whether from the bible or from our modern family histories, bond us to one another.

This feels really good to me.

Cultural memory is particularly important to humanistic Jews. We do not experience spirituality or transcendence through a relationship with god. Instead, we find it in community, in our families and friends. Today, we experience this by being part of our Jewish community. One of my favorite reflections on the Jewish holidays is that there are Jews all over the world who are doing the same thing as us today.

Then there are our personal memories --- the bits that make up our personal identity. Were we loved, or not loved enough. Were we proud of our family or the opposite? Did we have best friends or do we have bad memories of our school age years? Were we smart enough? Or did we struggle? Did we experience accomplishments and competency? Have we found things we like to do—job or otherwise?

Did we experience a loss of loved ones too early, or disappointment at a goal unmet, a relationship that did not work out? Do you remember really stupid things you've done or said? Yes, we all have memories of loss, regret, shame – and the way we sort and store them creates our personal identity.

Some of us have gaps in our memories that need to be filled. In the case of my friend, he visited Germany to find out the remaining details of his parent's lives --- which as holocaust survivors they chose not to share with their children. He needed to see the home where he was born, the concentration camp where they were interned, and discover what work they did there.

Memory is the place we revisit our experience of loved ones. These memories can feel like a prison where we cling and tie them to us, or they can create a warm sanctuary. Sometimes it is both. A year has gone by since my uncle died. While I'm sad, I'm glad to say that my thoughts of him are soothing--fond memories of fun, his views of the world, his laser sharp assessment of politics and people, his advice, his example, his love and support and my good fortune to have had him in my family.

Memories are also created; in fact, in our family, we say we are *in charge* of our children's memories. By this I mean that it's our job as parents to make sure they *have* good memories. Did you ever feel like skipping the birthday party or the family vacation. Forget it, we are responsible for creating good memories!! The family jokes, traditions, great Seders, bat mitzvah and graduation parties, the family recipes, a return to the same vacation spot every year. And we frame the family stories—repeating them often--- so our children know who they are and from where they came.

Memories need to bear witness, When there have been wrongs perpetuated against an individual or a people, we have a moral obligation to bear witness to these historic events. The reasons to do so are varied and deciding how to do so can be difficult. For the Jewish community, we need to remember the history of the holocaust, the suffering of our people and to teach both ourselves and the rest of the world about this horrific history with the intention of “never again.”

Memorials are an expression of culture to honor the dead or an event from the past. In ancient Greece, like the Wings of Samothrace, they were celebratory and glorious; and think about the sculptures of glorious generals and their horses in central Park. By 1982 we had the Vietnam Memorial, only a block of black granite with engraved names, which reflected ambivalence about war. Today there are holocaust memorials in Europe with only stones to mark the horrific past.

Today, we ask a lot of our memorials. We want them to help us recognize and recover from trauma and tragedy---but who decides how we are to experience this memory? What should we remember?

When is it too much memory such that a visitor becomes paralyzed by the experience? When is it right so that we can remember, but are also able to move on. In New York we observe the delicacy of these choices in the protracted process that is underway to design a fitting memorial for the 9/11—architecture being only one part of the challenge.

Striking the right balance with our memories is key.

According to Oscar Wilde, memory is the diary we all carry around with us. What is important to understand is that *you* write the diary, and *you* get to have poetic license. If you are a Jewish humanist, you don't think God is writing about you in the book of life today, but that you are in charge of the book.

The humanist message here is---just like we have the power to shape our lives, we have the power to shape our memories. We are not victims---yes, we live in world that has no rhyme or reason sometimes, in fact, is chaotic. What we do as humanists is face our lives with courage and make the best of it.

Managing our memories helps us to have a good life--- We need to live with some and let others go. There are times and ways to mourn, to feel sad, to regret. There are people and events that we should not forget, but we must not dwell. Don't wallow in troubles, disappointments or losses—everybody, I mean *everybody* has them. All of our lives are a testament to the human condition—we need to be able to move on and stay positive in the present.

Let me leave you with two thoughts:

Life is our rough biography, memory smoothes out the edges.

And my favorite:

Happiness is good health and a bad memory. Think about it.