



Yom Kippur 2008 – Discussion Topic

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

**Introductory Remarks
by Rabbi Peter H. Schweitzer**

It's customary, as I'm sure you know, to end a wedding with the ritual breaking of a glass or light bulb, which some think makes a louder pop. In my ceremonies I invite both partners to enjoy this ritual together and if there are children from a previous marriage, they get to come up and step on a glass too. It's fun for everyone.

But what's the meaning behind the ritual? Some go for the schmaltzy explanation that it is supposed to remind us of the fragility of life and human relationships and that it is supposed to be as difficult to put the glass back together as it is to break the newly married couple apart. Or, they may say, it symbolizes a break from the past and the beginning of a new life together. On the other hand, if you prefer an anthropological commentary as I do, the ritual is likely enacted to make a loud noise that will scare away evil spirits that are said to threaten the newly married couple.

But there is another explanation, perhaps the most familiar of all, that reflects the Jewish predisposition to focus on finding the gray, storm cloud even when it is shining out. According to countless rabbis, but count this one out, we step on the glass to remember the destruction of the Temple some two thousand years ago. Even at times of joy, we are admonished, we should not forget the sad times that have happened to our people.

What a burden this is, and what a downer for an otherwise happy occasion. What does it do to a people to be so obsessed and traumatized by its memories?

Remember, we are told with an insistence, how we were slaves in Egypt.

Remember what Amalek did to you when you came out of Egypt and attacked you when you were faint and weary.

Remember the martyrs of our people, who suffered unbearable torture by the Romans but remained steadfast in their Jewish identity.

Remember the persecutions, the suffering, the blood libel accusations, the expulsions, the list goes on and on.

Elie Wiesel has said, “Most cultures celebrate their victories. We, uniquely, remember our tragedies.”

But is this how we want to look at things? Can we not interrupt the cycle of victimization with a more positive outlook?

In fact, partner to our memory of tragedy can also be a sense of deliverance or at least dignity.

Remember the Warsaw Uprising and how we stood our ground.

Remember the Entebbe Rescue and how we took action.

Remember not just our slavery from Egypt but how we escaped to freedom.

Likewise, on a personal level, we can recall countless instances of family members facing adversity and also finding resilience to forge ahead with a new lease on life.

Memory can recall loss. It can also instill hope.

But memory is also a very tricky business.

Memories can be hard to bear or to share. They may be suppressed, avoided, ignored and denied. They also can get dislodged and re-emerge suddenly, when least expected.

Or they may get cleaned up and revised, or embellished and exaggerated, and they may take on a life of their own that has no resemblance in fact to the reality being recalled.

There is also a forgetting over time. Our memories silently dwindle and dissipate, weaken and take leave of us. And then who are we, without these recollections?

Memories make connections. To people we knew and events we lived and also to people who came before and events that occurred well before our time. We have our own memories and we also grow up in the shadow of other peoples' memories. We inherit stories from the past, we become guardians of family lore, we are entrusted with collective memories of our people. We also look to pass our memories down to the next generation and become the objects of other peoples' memories of us.

Today, Yom Kippur, is a day of contemplation. It is also a day devoted to memory and memorial.

To examine these subjects further, we've invited two of our members to reflect on these various themes, to share their thoughts and to speak about their memories. We're privileged now to listen to their reflections.

First we'll hear from Elyse Pivnick. Then we'll hear from Richard Mann.