



Yom Kippur 2008 – Discussion Topic

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

**In Memory of My Mother
by Richard Mann**

My mother always told me: “Write things down. If you don’t, you won’t remember.” She left notes for herself on the refrigerator and on the kitchen table. “Call butcher- four steaks and chicken, make dental appointments for the boys”. If you wanted to know what was happening next Friday night, you’d look at my mother’s calendar. You heard of Tonto? She was the Lone Arranger. As she got older and was less able to keep track, I would often hear her exclaim, “What is happening to my mind?” So what did she do? She wrote more notes to herself and more notes to her children. She sent them in letters with clippings from newspapers – envelopes filled with worry about health, safety, and money matters. “Richard, I hope you don’t mind me telling you. But look, it’s not just my opinion. It’s in the New York Times.”

Her letters often times spilled into narrative. She liked to describe exactly what she ate for dinner right down to the third fig which was usually one fig too many. She often included Polaroid snapshots of relatives. She wanted to make sure that we all knew who was who. She transcribed stories her mother told her about surviving the Russian and German occupations of Poland during World War I. She preserved and protected as much family history as she could. Thanks to my mother, I still have the 1973 high school playbill of “Fiddler on the Roof” in which I played Perchik and the 1974 government document indicating my official draft status during the last year of the Viet Nam War.

My mother always asked me to keep a journal. She loved my stories and wanted me to write them down. She also understood the benefits of paying close attention to life’s journey in writing. Here’s a journal entry from a phone conversation with my mother in 1995:

“So we had to stop in the Emergency Medical Center off of Rte. 3 on the way back. But it was just heart palpitations. I worked myself up into a state.”

“Mom. On the way back from where?”

“Brooklyn, Oh, I thought you knew?”

“When?”

“The other night when we had dinner together.”

“The food didn’t agree with you?”

“No, it was all right. It was OK. I never know for sure with broccoli but that wasn’t it. It was his driving.”

“You’re talking about dad.”

“Of course I’m talking about your father. He’s a mad man in that car. Oy, he tail gates. He always did. I don’t think it’s his age or the medication. I just can’t take it any more. Even sitting in the back seat doesn’t work. So, I took him to my gastroenterologist.”

“Huh? But he has his own gastroenterologist. You needed a second opinion?”

“No. Just listen. My gastroenterologist told him that if he loves me, he’s going to have to change the way he drives. My stomach can’t take it.”

“Did it have any effect?”

“Of course not. He can’t change.”

“Mom, maybe it needs to be a longer conversation.”

“Why? If he’s not going to listen to my gastroenterologist, who is a wonderful man by the way, who can he listen to?”

“No mom, that’s not the point. You need to follow up on this subject at a relaxed time with dad so that he might be able to hear it better.”

“There are no relaxed times with your father. He comes home, sits on that chair, and boom, the TV is on. There used to be a cigar as well. I should be thankful?”

According to my journal, I drove with my parents in the back seat of the car, two days after this phone conversation. We were meeting family friends at a diner in Long Island but there was something wrong with the directions we were given, and when we couldn’t find the diner, my father became increasingly agitated behind the wheel. The frequency of sudden, violent, u-turns increased to the point that I started reciting to myself: “Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohaynu, Adonai Echad.” You know the old saying: There are no atheists in the back seat of your father’s car.

After my mother died, I found in the drawer of her night table a 1958 DMV notice revoking my father’s driver’s license as a consequence of receiving three speeding tickets in one year. It was not the first I heard of this. But why did my mother keep this notice and keep it so close to her? Here’s my theory. Without the evidence, people might think she was making it up. She wanted everyone to know after she was gone what it was like to live with a nut. But my father isn’t crazy now and he wasn’t crazy then. He was just stubborn, reckless, and unwilling to process the conflicts that came up between them. Instead, he put his pedal to the medal while she recoiled bitterly in the back seat.

This past summer I read the book “In Search of Memory” by Eric Kandel. Kandel is a Viennese Jew who fled Vienna at age 9 for America where he would become a Nobel Laureate in Physiology. His first profession, however, was psychoanalysis. Kandel wanted a better understanding of how memory worked in the human psyche, but in the interest of science, he decided to be less ambitious, and looked instead at how memory worked in a marine snail. He investigated the reflex that causes the snail to withdraw its gill, the organ that allows it to breath in water. Kandel found that a single touch to the flesh that covers the gill is enough to cause gill withdrawal but as the snail becomes habituated to the touch, it stops withdrawing its gill, evidently recognizing no danger. But when the touch to that flesh is repeatedly linked to a shock to the tail, the snail withdraws its gill in response to the touch on a permanent basis.

Kandel observes the work of memory on a cellular level. He finds a gene, chemically activated by the shocks, which directs the construction of an additional synapse at the spot where the flesh sensory neuron connects to the gill motor neuron. He observes, under the microscope, the formation of a long-term memory. I have some long-term memories myself. Father’s car - screeching u-turns- Shema Yisrael. I will never sit in that car again. I am permanently withdrawing my gill and the gills of my wife and two children and we will draw our oxygen elsewhere.

So you see, memory aids the survival of the individual, the family, and the species. It is the glue that holds our sense of self, together. It creates continuity, not only within the self, but through the generations as well. We Jews are people of the book. We read what our ancestors have written and learn from their stories. Unlike the snail, we are looking for more than mere survival. We want to live a good life, to contribute to our community, and to help our children do the same.

Three years ago my father suffered a stroke and he lost all sense of who he was. Two weeks had passed and he was tied down to his hospital bed, feverishly searching for a way of escape. But the human brain is an amazing organ. Despite the loss of oxygen to his left temporal lobe, the seat of language and memory, his brain found other circuits that made up for this deficit. A month after his stroke I watched him return again and again, now on his own two feet, to the sign on the side of his hospital door: "Milton Mann, room 704". He recited these words over and over- as if he was learning to read for the first time. The code was baffling but his desire to understand was so great that he was not to be denied. Dad is now eighty-six and he is once again going to work, once again a loving father and grandfather. What's more, he drives his car every weekend to Long Island, exceeding the speed limit no doubt, to visit his lady friend. My brother, the fundamentalist Christian, prays for his safety. I have no objections. In fact, it seems quite miraculous to me that my father is still alive.

But what if there is no all knowing father who responds to our prayers, no eternal book where our lives are recorded, and no soul that has forever to look back and take stock ... maybe that's why my mother told me to write things down. Maybe that's why she always wanted to keep the record straight. If not us, then who? If not now, then when?

When Eric Kandel was awarded the Noble Prize, the president of Austria called to invite him back to Vienna to attend a ceremony in his honor. Kandel accepted under the provision that the president would hold a symposium about Austria's role in World War II. The country claimed to be victims of Hitler's aggression despite the fact that roughly 3 million Jewish deaths during the war are attributable to the actions of Austrian functionaries. Their collective memory had a direct impact on the their willingness, or rather, lack of willingness to honor Jewish financial claims and pay war reparations.

Kandel was able to make use of his newly acquired fame to effect change. He found that the Jewish agency responsible for maintaining the synagogues, Jewish schools and hospitals, and the Jewish cemetery in Vienna was going bankrupt. While the federal government continued to deny any obligation, Kandel persuaded the governors of the Austrian states to help the agency financially. Kandel subsequently found out that the very agency that he helped to revive was the one that provided the funds for his emigration to America in the months following Krystallnacht, sixty-two years earlier. It was the very organization to which he owed his life. In 2004, he returned to Vienna for Yom Kippur services in order, in his words, "to atone and to remember."

For what is "atonement" if not an act of memory and an acknowledgement of the incompleteness of the individual. We can not stand alone. We owe so much to the people around us, sometimes monetarily, but more often, we simply owe the debt of gratitude.

In the final years of my mother's life, the drawer of her night table became the repository of her memories. Beside the faded photographs and hand-made mother's day cards, I found, in her unmistakable script, lyrics from her favorite Broadway musicals mixed with a series of recollections from childhood. At one point she apologizes to the future reader, "I hope I'm not driving you crazy with all of this". "Driving you crazy" was a favorite expression in my family of origin for obvious reasons. I also found note cards on which she recorded her entire medical history. She would hand one of these cards to the doctor each time she was readmitted to a hospital. As she got older, she knew that she would

be less able to trust her memory, so to insure an accurate record and the best possible care, she wrote it all down.

When my mother died in January of 2005, hardest hit of all was my youngest son Isaac. Her death was a stunning blow to his naïve belief that life somehow goes on forever. A year after her death, Isaac wrote, “When I heard that my grandma died, I could not stop screaming. I realized later that instead of feeling sad for my grandma, I was angry that this was happening to me. And I was so angry that I never heard something my dad said to me, something that might have been one of the most important things that dad ever said to me. ‘Grandma lives on in us’.”

On behalf of my family and my loving wife Sally, I’d like to thank Peter and the congregation for this opportunity to remember, record, and retell, to learn, to share, and to express gratitude.