



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

YOM KIPPUR 5774 • 2013

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 15, 2013

Yom Kippur - Two

Who Am I?



Meaningful Sermons

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

"Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart"

5774

Yom Kippur - Two >

Who Am I? Remembering Your True Self

September 15, 2013

YOM KIPPUR 2013

Who Am I?

ABSTRACT

Imagine you woke up one fine day and forgot who you are. What would your life be like? What would your world be like?

For some people forgetting who they are is the daily reality. Some people, when asked, "Who are you?" respond by pulling out their business card. They confuse what they do with who they are, and consequently they forget who they are.

Today is Yom Kippur. And Yom Kippur never lets us forget, for Yom Kippur is a day dedicated to memory.

Just look – the prayers are saturated with remembrances. From the *zochreinu l'chaim* prayer to the haunting description of the Ten Martyrs, *aileh ezkara v'nafshi olai eshpcha*, to the bulk of the *Musaf* service itself called the *Seder Avoda*, which recalls the order of the Yom Kippur service in the Holy Temple. And, of course, *Yizkor*, the remembrance of our loved ones who have passed away.

What is the power of memory and what secret lies in the memory of Yom Kippur?

Through a humorous *Chelem* anecdote, moving stories of how memory captured the deepest love and saved children after the Holocaust, the memorable words of R' Ashi in a seemingly unrelated Talmud, *Ana hu d'ramai anafshai v'adkari*, "It was I who cast it upon my soul, and I remembered" –

we come to realize that memory isn't just remembering something; memory is bearing witness to our true identities. It is remembering who we really are.

And this testimony has the power to change the judgment of the world!

WHO AM I?**REMEMBERING YOUR TRUE SELF**

Take-away message: Without memory what are we? More than reminding us who we are, memory let's us be who we are! Stop to remember, please. Exercise: create memory markers. Remember to remember.

1. Forget What I Said (Joke)

As a rabbi, I have had the distinct privilege of being privy to some pretty bizarre conversations. Just the other day, a person walked into my office and asked me if Jewish law required his private jet to be graced with a *mezuzah*?

I told him that I wasn't really sure and would have to look in the holy books and get back to him. As an afterthought, I mentioned that our library also didn't have a *mezuzah*. This special *mentsch* with the private jet quickly offered to buy us the nicest *mezuzah* ever and put it up on the doorpost of our library himself.

I said: That's fantastic! There's only one problem, Mr. Private Jet – we don't yet have a library...

That was a fascinating conversation indeed. You should have heard how it ended ...

But probably the most interesting conversation of all occurred a few years back when a congregant came running into my office all hysterical. It went something like this:

"Rabbi! I have a serious problem. I cannot remember anything! I do not remember if I prayed this morning, if I heard shofar on Rosh Hashanah, if I fasted on Yom Kippur, if I kissed the *mezuzah* on my way into synagogue, I can't remember if I believe in God – nothing! I cannot even remember if I like gefilte fish! This problem is driving me crazy!"

So I asked him: "When did you first notice this problem?"

He looked at me all perplexed and confused, and said: "Rabbi, what is this problem you are talking about?"

2. Amnesia (Optional)

Imagine if you couldn't remember anything. If everything that happened to you and everything you experienced was over and done with the moment you moved on to the next thing. What would your life look like?

Like the man in the above conversation, imagine you couldn't remember your problems, but neither could you remember your solutions. Imagine you couldn't remember why you are sitting here in a House of God on Yom Kippur; you couldn't remember that this was a House of God; you couldn't even remember that today was Yom Kippur.

Now imagine you woke up one fine morning and forgot who you are. What would your life be like?

Now, I know that some of you would actually prefer forgetting a thing or two of the past. You know the one: "Some dance to remember, some dance to forget."

And in truth, I have met people who have such horrendous experiences etched in their memories and haunting their lives that at times I sincerely wish that I would be able to help them by erasing those memories.

But, at the same time, is there anyone here who really would like to erase their entire past?!

As one young man told me recently: "Rabbi, I really would do anything to forget certain past experiences. But I realize that many beautiful and loving memories would disappear as well. And that would be far worse..."

No, my friends, memory is one of our greatest gifts and blessings. We wake up each morning not needing to begin anew; we can continue living and building upon that which we achieved yesterday. Our knowledge and experience accumulates and builds upon the past. We learn from our mistakes and grow through them.

But above all, we want to remember who we are and why we are here on earth.

3. Identity Crisis (Alternative Opening)

The people in Chelem were famous fools. One day a Chelem “chochom” who was suffering from an identity crisis said to his friend: “Please help me. Let’s exchange clothes, and maybe I will be able to discover who I am in the process.” His friend eagerly complied, perhaps thinking that he would also discover his own identity as a result. Once they exchanged clothes, the fellow said to his friend: “Now I know who you are, but who am I?”

This, my friends, is the essence of Yom Kippur. To remember who you *truly* are.

You may be wondering, how can we forget who we are? Well, the fact is that due to our immersion in “life” – in the daily grind of our material existence – we often forget, or perhaps never knew in the first place, who we truly are. John Lennon put it this way: “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.”

To demonstrate this: When someone asks you who you are do you give them your business card? Well, that’s what most people do. But you know something: Your business card tells people *what you do*, not *who you are*.

Never confuse the two. Gandhi said:

“Your actions become your habits,

Your habits become your values,

Your values become your destiny.”

So be careful that your business card, what you do, does not define who you become. And what you become does not define who you are...

Knowing – remembering – who you are, your true identity, is far more difficult than it sounds.

And Yom Kippur is the one day of the year when we are reminded.

Just look – today’s prayers are saturated with memory:

- In the Silent Devotion, we say *zochreinu l’chaim*, “remember us for life, King who desires life”

- Toward the conclusion of Musaf, the haunting description of the Ten Martyrs begins with this line – *aileh ezkara v'nafshi olai eshpcha*, "these I recall and my soul overflows with sorrow"
- The bulk of the Musaf service itself is called the *Seder Avoda*, and it is devoted to remembering the order of the Yom Kippur service in the Holy Temple, remembering how the High Priest would walk into the Holy Holies.
- And, of course, there is *Yizkor*, the prayer for remembering our loved ones who have passed away.

What is this mysterious-yet-powerful thing called Memory and why is it such a focus of the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur?

4. I Still Recognize Her (Optional Story)

The power of remembering is demonstrated in this moving story:

An elderly man would take a long bus ride each morning to an old age home, where his wife of many decades lay in her bed, frail and almost immobile, suffering from Alzheimer's disease. At 8:30 a.m., the time they would always eat breakfast together, this man would show up at the home, sit with his wife, feed her and talk to her.

One morning a nurse approached him and said, "You really need not bother to make this long trip each morning. Unfortunately, she does not recognize you any longer."

"You are right," the man replied. "But I still recognize her."

5. Who we Are

Yom Kippur reminds us that even when a part of us experiences amnesia, even if you have gotten lost in all the activities we do, on this day we remember who we are.

Too often, the things we do in life replace our true identities. Yom Kippur is the day when we set the record straight. We declare and testify to our true identities:

I am a Jew, a member of a nation that has been here for thousands of years, with a very clear and distinct mission – to bring light into this world, to spread kindness and virtue through my Torah and mitzvahs, to refine and transform my corner of the world into a Divine home.

6. Fascinating Talmud

The Talmud captures this theme and message in Tractate *Ketubot* which discusses (among other things) the legal nature of a *ketuba*, the marriage contract, along with many legal nuances and general contractual issues – such as witnesses, signatures, accuracy, fine print, riders and loopholes.

Let me read you one fascinating section:¹

Our Rabbis taught: “A person may write his testimony in a document and through it give evidence even after many years.” R. Huna said: “Only if he remembers it on his own.”² R. Yochanan said: “Even if he does not remember it on his own.” Rabba said: “You may infer from R. Yochanan if two know evidence and one of them has forgotten, the other one may remind him.” They asked: “What if the litigant himself reminds the witness?” R. Habina said: “Even the litigant may.” Mar Bar R. Ashi, said: “The litigant may not.” And the law is: The litigant may not remind the witness. If however the litigant³ is a scholar, he [may remind the witness]. As in the case of R. Ashi.

¹ Ketubot 20a-b.

² Without the full aid of the document, the document is just a reminder and clarifier of all the details. We are also here not talking about a legal document, with witnesses, signatures, times, dates, etc. otherwise why would you need the witness to remember in the first place – just submit the document itself? See Rashi there and commentaries.

³ This follows Rashi’s interpretation. Others opine that “scholar” refers to the witness.

R' Ashi knew evidence for R. Kahana. R. Kahana said to him: "Does the master remember that evidence?" And R. Ashi said to him: "No."

"But was it not so and so?" R. Ashi replied: "I do not know."

In the end, R. Ashi remembered and he gave evidence for him. He saw that R. Kahana was surprised, so he said to him: "Do you think I relied upon you? It was I who cast it upon my soul [i.e. I wracked my brains] and I remembered it."

This is a classic example of a Talmudic conversation: the ebb and flow of opinion, balanced by the detailed discovery of nuance. Here at issue is the power and weakness and legitimacy of memory, specifically when it pertains to testimony.⁴

There are different methods of submitting legal evidence. One of these methods is the witness, when (usually) two people come forward and say, "We witnessed so-and-so doing such-and-such in this time and place..."

A second method is the document – a legal record, which states particular facts as proof and evidence, verifying times, dates, witnesses to a certain event or experience, together with signatures, legal jargon, all supervised by a court.

7. Has the Rabbi Lost It? (Humor)

At this point, you might very well be asking: Has this Rabbi completely lost it? What's he doing? The service is boring enough on its own without having to add to it some cryptic piece of Talmud! These prayers are tedious enough as it is without compounding the problem by introducing some archaic legal discussion of thousands of years ago! And anyway, what has this witness/evidence/remembering have to do with Yom Kippur?

Before another mass Jewish exodus takes place, allow me a few minutes to explain, and you will discover a fascinating insight about each one of us.

⁴ See *Shita Mekubetzes* at length on this *daf*.

But first, let's lighten things up a bit ...

A few old couples used to get together to talk about life and to have a good time. One day one of the men, Harry, started talking about this fantastic kosher restaurant he went to the other night with his wife.

"Really," one of the men said, "what's it called?" After thinking for a few seconds Harry said, "What are those good smelling flowers called again?"

"Do you mean a rose?" the first man questioned.

"Yes, that's it," he exclaimed. Looking over at his wife he said, "Rose, darling, what was that kosher restaurant we went to the other night?"

8. In Context

Now ... let us read the above Talmud in this context:

Today is Yom Kippur, the Day of Universal Judgment. God is the Supreme Judge. Existence is the Court of Law. Heaven and Earth have come to testify. We are the litigants and we are also witnesses. We, each of us, bear witness today for today, each of us is being judged.

Says the Talmud – Our Rabbis taught: A person may write his testimony in a document and through it give evidence even after many years.

We are busy; we are overwhelmed; we live in a highly materialistic world that isn't always the greatest reminder of our true calling, so we often forget – we forget the Holy of Holies that resides in each of our souls, we forget the divine gifts we have been gifted, we forget the testimony ingrained upon each of our hearts at Sinai.

Ah, but don't worry, says the Talmud, there is a document, there is a Torah, there are signposts on this journey called life that remind us of the great testimony, and each of us are living witnesses of our great legacy. Even if we may have forgotten some of the details, our mere existence is a living miracle to the eternity of *Am Yisroel Chai*.

Our very being testifies to the countless sacrifices and commitments our parents, grandparents and ancestors made to be Jewish. [There is a Rose that reminds us of that kosher restaurant called Righteousness.] We witnesses are reminded – *and through it give evidence even after many years!*

9. Second Witness

Then continues the Talmud – *R. Huna said: "Only if he remembers it on his own." R. Yochanan said: "Even if he does not remember it on his own." Rabba said: "You may infer from R. Yochanan if two know evidence and one of them has forgotten, the other one may remind him."*

One could think: I have forgotten everything, I don't know if I'm coming or if I'm going. I don't know if I'm a good Jew. I don't even know what it means to be a good Jew. I cannot remember my soul; I cannot remember my people; I do not recognize my past, my present, my future!

Perhaps this is why the Torah (generally) requires *two* witnesses to testify, and one does not suffice. What?! One witness says he forgot?!

You may infer from R. Yochanan if two know evidence and one of them has forgotten, the other one may remind him.

You are my brother, you are my sister, we are all witnesses here in this court room of life! If I forget, you remind me. If you forget, I remind you. Today, on Yom Kippur, if you are worried that you have forgotten, even for half a second, you are suddenly and soulfully reminded by your fellow witnesses, your Jewish brothers and sisters. As we gather together and pray on this holiest day of the year, we each remind ourselves of our glorious heritage.

Ah, but then the obvious legal question – *What if the litigant himself reminds the witness?*

Today is Judgment Day. Each of us is being judged – we are all litigants, *Baalei Din!* Can we, the litigants being judged, legally remind the witnesses of the life-and-death testimony they bear?

10. The Litigant Scholar

Thus continues the Talmud – *R. Habina said: “Even the litigant may.” Mar Bar R. Ashi, said: “The litigant may not. And the law is: The litigant may not remind the witness. If however the litigant is a scholar, he [may remind the witness].*

Today is Yom Kippur, the Holy of Holies. Today, in this divine courtroom, where we all rise for the Honorable Justice, the Creator of the Universe Himself, do you for a second think that there are no scholars here? Even if we personally may not be the scholars, we carry in our genes the enormous scholarship of our ancestors, not to mention the entire Torah that we studied in our mother’s wombs.⁵

If you think this even for a micro-second, then you truly have lost your memory!

Concludes our piece of Talmud that R. Kahana was surprised that R. Ashi testified on his behalf even though he said that he didn’t remember on his own, not once, but twice! That’s when R. Ashi said, *“Do you think I relied upon you? It was I who cast it upon my soul and I remembered it.”*

Ana hu d’ramai anafshai, says R. Ashi, “It was I who cast it upon my soul.”

“V’adkari – and I remembered!”

11. The Sacred Truth

Today is Yom Kippur. Every single sacred man, woman and child in this sacred room, on this sacred day, is casting the sacred truth of *Yiddishkeit* by bearing the spark of Judaism upon his or her soul.

Like R. Ashi, the testimony we each bear witness to comes from the deepest parts of who we are.

⁵Talmud, *Niddah* 30b.

The mere fact that each of us is here today on Yom Kippur – the astonishing phenomenon that millions of Jews who may usually not identify with anything Jewish attend synagogue – or in some other way remember the holiest day of the year – is the greatest testimony of the integrity of our souls!

After all we have endured – the destructions, expulsions, genocides, Crusades, pogroms, Inquisitions and, of course, the darkest of the darkest, the Shoah – we still endure and stand here on Yom Kippur ...

12. We Remember

Is there any greater testimony than this: *Ana hu d'ramai anafshai* - "It was I who cast it upon my soul" – *V'adkari* – "and I remembered!"

We remember the six million not as something outside of who we are, but as something that makes us who we are. We remember our parents, our grandparents, our great-grandparents, all the way back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, not as we remember a piece of history but as a piece of who we are as Jews. We remember it as witnesses.

And, finally, we do the same for God, and ask that God do the same for us. We remember You, God, because You are cast upon our souls; and You God remember us because we are cast upon – and cast from – Your very soul!

This is the power of memory and this is why today, on Yom Kippur, we remember.

When we say *zochreinu l'chaim*, "Remember us for Life, King Who desires life," we are reminding the world, who bears witness to our commitment and offer testimony to our righteousness, that our verdict deserves to be Life!

When we recite *aileh ezkara v'nafshi olai eshpcha*, "These I recall and my soul overflows with sorrow," we aren't merely recalling a hell. We ourselves are bearing witness to the overflowing sorrows of our people, our brothers and sisters and committing to replace that overflowing sorrow with overflowing joy!

When we pray the holy words of the *Seder Avoda*, remembering the order of the Yom Kippur service in the Holy Temple, remembering how the High Priest would walk into the Holy of Holies – we aren't only remembering, we are living, we are breathing the Holy of Holies that resides, that burns, in each and every one of our beings.

And, of course, when we recite *Yizkor* – we remember our loved ones; we bear witness to their lives. We, by being here, are the evidence, the testimonial, the proof, that our loved ones live on. Live on for all eternity.

13. Remember You are a Jew (Inspirational Story)

I would like to conclude with this impressed upon your hearts:

An elderly woman sits at bedtime ready to recite the *Shema* prayer with her granddaughter. This wonderful three-minute routine will send the child off to sleep feeling loved and protected. But today, she first has a story to tell:

The story begins when she was four years old, at the outbreak of World War II, and her mother smuggled her into a monastery in Lithuania, hoping the nuns would hide her little Jewish girl until after the war. "I will return," she promised. "But meanwhile, remember you are a Jew, daughter of the Chosen Nation. They will teach you the ways of a foreign religion. During the day, keep your Judaism hidden from those who wish to destroy your people. But at night, allow your pure Jewish soul to turn to God with the words of the *Shema* and He will send angels to watch over you."

On that day, when the mother left the monastery, it was the last time she ever saw her little girl. But the little girl never forgot her words. And every night, she would huddle under her cover and mumble the words of her people. One night, years later, a man came into the room where the girls slept:

“He was tall and wore a black hat. He turned to the nuns, standing at the doorway and said he had come for the Jewish children. It was time to take the Jewish children home. He had to find out who we were. He stood on a chair and turned to us in our beds. And with tears running down his cheeks into his long white beard, he started reciting the *Shema*. I found myself joining in and soon I heard Patricia and Annette and Miriam, from the beds nearby, haltingly reciting the words, too. All of us with Jewish souls joined in. We ran up to him, surrounded him. And so, with hands joined, with tears and song, we left the monastery with this man who returned us home to our land.

“And, so my dear girl, with these words always remember that you are a Jew.”

And with that grandmother and granddaughter recited the *Shema*.

Sometimes it is easier to forget than to remember. Sometimes it is easier to remember than to forget. It is our job to create memorable moments – a *Shema*, a prayer, a mitzvah, a Shabbat, a blowing of the Shofar – memorable moments which will tell our children, and their children, and theirs: “Remember, you are a Jew.”

May this testimony sign and seal us for a verdict of a long, happy, healthy and holy life. Amen.