

Remember the Dancing, Too

Rabbi Ashira Boxman

In December 2023, I booked a trip to Israel by myself. This wasn't for Birthright or an organized synagogue trip. There was no itinerary or tour bus waiting for me when I arrived. I simply felt this relentless urge that I needed to be there.

A number of my friends, including myself, had lost loved ones since October 7th, which had happened just two months earlier. Others had already been called up to their army bases in Gaza and the North of Israel. And as I spoke to my friends from thousands of miles away, I had this overwhelming feeling that I just needed to get on a plane and wrap my arms around them. And so I did.

While I was there, I volunteered, visited kibbutzim that had been attacked, and just before I left, I made a trip to the first of its kind, Nova Music Festival exhibit in Tel Aviv. This exhibition sought to recreate parts of the festival grounds and shared testimonies from those who had been there.

As I walked out of there I was filled with sorrow, disbelief and anger. I could not wrap my head around the horror that our fellow Jews experienced. While I was waiting for the rest of the group to come out, I struck up a conversation with one of the young women working at the front desk. She asked me what I thought of the exhibition, and I began telling her how heartbroken and devastated I was. How, after everything our people have endured, could history repeat itself like this? How could Jews, once again, be massacred simply for being Jewish? Why did the...

And then she stopped me mid sentence. She told me that she, too, had survived the festival, somehow managing to run to safety even after being shot in the leg.

I don't remember her exact words that followed, but I have never forgotten what she wanted me to understand. Yes, she told me, what happened there was horrific. Of course people need to remember it. But she was afraid that the horror would become the only thing people remembered about those at Nova. She told me about this special community who come together often. A group of people who gather to dance, to love freely, to experience music, friendship, connection

and joy. And she worried that the brutality of what happened to them would somehow eclipse the beauty of who they had been before it happened.

What she wanted people to know was who they were before 6:30 that morning.

She wanted us to remember the horror but she also wanted us to remember the dancing. She wanted us to remember what happened to them but also who they were before tragedy befell them.

I have come back to this conversation many times since.

It helped me realize that part of the human condition is to fixate on the not-so-great memories. And part of that is important. It's a survival mechanism, helping us learn from the past so that we can try avoiding it in the future. But part of it also has to do with what memories we allow to take up space in our lives, we get the choice in how we let those memories shape our future.

And when it comes to us as Jews, a people with plenty of painful memories to carry, it is essential that we choose to remember not only the difficult moments, but the great ones too. And just as important is how we choose to let those memories shape the way we live today and the Jewish future we build tomorrow.

We all know and have heard the phrase: "Never forget." Growing up, whether in my Jewish day school, synagogue, or summer camp, it was that common, familiar phrase that every Jewish child seemed to know. We used it when speaking about the Holocaust, and more broadly, it has become part of the language we use in response to Jewish tragedy and persecution, including October 7th.

And lately, as we have found ourselves living through such difficult times as Jews, I have been thinking a lot about the Jewish identities we are shaping in response to this moment, both our own and those of the next generation.

Our children are growing up acutely aware of antisemitism. They see it on social media. They hear about it on college campuses. They witness hatred directed at Jews and are asked to defend their Judaism before they even had the chance to discover what they love about being Jewish.

And so it has made me wonder about the mantra I grew up with: “Never forget.”

“Never forget” calls us to hold the past in our minds and ensure that it is never lost. But could there be an additional mantra, one that asks us not only to hold onto memory, but to act because of it? Shockingly... our tradition offers us another word, a more active, aspirational word that we, as Jews, have already committed ourselves to: *zachor*, remember.

Throughout the Torah, *zachor* asks us to remember both the difficult and the beautiful, the past and what it asks of us in the future. We are commanded to remember that we were slaves in Egypt, AND we are commanded to remember the day we went free from Egypt. We remember what happened to us, but we also remember what we are called to do because of it.

In Dara Horn’s book, *People Love Dead Jews*, she argued that we have become very good at remembering how Jews died. But have we done as good a job remembering how Jews lived? I want us to raise Jews who not only know what they are standing against, but, most importantly, know and feel deeply what they are standing for.

Since we cannot control every story the world tells about Jews or every act of antisemitism our children may encounter, it is vital that we commit ourselves to shaping the Jewish memories our children carry with them and just as importantly, the memories we ourselves choose to carry.

Rosh Hashanah is also referred to as Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Remembrance. This name shows up throughout our prayers as we ask God to remember us. To remember all of us, the good, the bad, and the in between. And if on this day we ask God to remember us, perhaps we should also ask ourselves: What do we want to remember? What are the memories we want to carry with us into this new year?

So this Rosh Hashanah, I want to offer us three things to remember. **Remember our peoples’ strength. Remember our traditions’ emphasis on community. And remember Judaism’s value of continuity.**

The classic humorous summary of Jewish history is, “They tried to kill us. We survived. Let’s eat!” Like all good jokes, there is some truth to it. Again and again, the Jewish people have been targeted, survived, and, in true Jewish fashion, created a holiday and proceeded to eat.

Somehow, despite all odds, this small people, whose story stretches back thousands of years to the ancient Israelites, has continued to survive.

As Mark Twain famously wrote in 1899, “All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?” Many, including myself, would attribute our immortality to our tradition’s commitment to memory. Whether it be Passover, Purim, or Chanukah, several of our holidays were created in remembrance of events in Jewish history that we continue to commemorate year after year.

Think about how truly unique we are. The great empires that conquered us in the ancient world, all eventually fell, their ancient civilizations and empires faded into history, while we, the descendants of the ancient Israelites and Judeans, remained. And we did not simply remain. We carried with us our ancient traditions, our festivals, our sacred texts, our stories, and eventually even revived our ancient language as a language of everyday life. From there, the Jewish people experienced countless expulsions, pogroms, the Holocaust and in our own time, the horrors of October 7th. Again and again, history has handed the Jewish people every opportunity to disappear and yet, we are still here.

And because of that, we should choose to carry a sense of pride in the Jewish lives we live today. Pride every time we continue to practice Judaism despite all those who told us we couldn’t. Pride when we feel the urge to cower or hide a part of who we are. Pride in knowing that simply by continuing to live proudly as Jews, we play an integral role in the Jewish story.

Dara Horn, also shared in her book,

“What one finds in Jewish storytelling, though, is something really different: a kind of realism that comes from humility...stories without conclusions, but full of endurance and resilience... stories not with endings but beginnings, the beginning of the search for meaning rather than the end- and the power of resilience and endurance to carry one through to that meaning.” (79)

Dara Horn reminds us that as Jews, hardship has never been the end of our story. Again and again, we have continued forward, carrying our questions with us, searching for meaning, and writing the next chapter.

And just last month, we watched that very kind of Jewish resilience unfold before our eyes as videos of former hostage, Emily Damari, marrying the love of her life, Danielle Amit filled our social media feeds. Her mom commented in the Times of Israel, “During those endless days and nights, there were moments when the thought of standing here tonight, seeing my daughter alive, safe, happy, and standing beside the person she loves, would have been impossible to imagine,” She went on: “Tonight, I don't want to look back at the 471 days. I want to look forward to all the days ahead”. Here, we see Damari's mom intentionally choosing and manifesting new joyful memories to shape her life instead of the previous 471 days.

Our people have astonishing strength and resilience and thus may we remember not only what was done to us, but who we became afterward.

Part of the Jewish people's secret to our strength is our tradition's emphasis on community. In both celebration and tragedy, we are taught כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה, All of Israel is responsible for one another. And the role of community finds its way into our lives every week through the observance of Shabbat. A holiday that routinely brings people together in an intentional way.

The famous saying attributed to the Israeli thinker Ahad Ha'am, “More than the Jewish people have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jewish people,” captures the incredible power of this ancient ritual and how it has held up our community throughout ages.

The concept is remarkable. Each week we intentionally carve out time in our busy calendar to focus on what matters most: connection with one another, with ourselves, with the natural world, and with God. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in his book *The Sabbath*, “There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”

Heschel reminds us of the necessity of communal presence in observing Shabbat. Whether it's sharing in the cooking for a Shabbat meal, showing up to pray so there can be a minyan or texting a loved one *Shabbat Shalom*, there are countless ways to engage in our traditions' most sacred observance.

Maimonides, the great medieval Torah scholar, teaches that on Rosh Hashanah, we are judged not only by our own actions, but by the actions of the community as a whole. He explains that if

the community tips even slightly toward the side of goodness, then we all benefit from that goodness.

I love this idea. It reminds us just how seriously Judaism takes the role of community in our lives. We are accountable for one another and the choices we make have an impact on one another. Judaism teaches that what we do together matters, and that each of us plays a role in strengthening our community.

Just as our tradition teaches us to value the community around us, it also asks us to ensure that this community continues long after us. Our Torah teaches this when Moses tells the Israelites, “I make this covenant not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here today and with those who are not here today.”

This then begs the questions- who exactly are “those who are not here today”? Many of the Rabbinic commentators understood these mysterious words to refer to those who were not yet born, the generations of Jews still to come. In other words, even before we entered the Promised Land, Judaism already had its own built-in strategic plan. (*with task forces i’m sure*)

From the very beginning, Judaism has insisted that we look both backwards and forward. Deuteronomy 32:7 teaches, “Remember the days of old, Consider the years of ages past; Ask your parent, who will inform you, Your elders, who will tell you.”

See, we are part of a story that began long before us and, God willing, will continue long after us.

This idea is embedded throughout our liturgy and our rituals. Every time we recite the *V’ahavta*, we say, “Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day and impress them upon your children.” In the Amidah, we proclaim, *l’dor vador nagid godlecha*—“from generation to generation we will declare Your greatness.” When someone we love dies, we say, “May their memory be for a blessing,” compelling us to keep part of them alive by allowing their memory to continue to bless us. In this way, we carry their legacy forward.

L’dor v’dor, from generation to generation, is one of Judaism’s most cherished values. It reminds us that we are not only practicing Judaism for ourselves, but we are responsible for deciding

what we will pass on to those who come next too. And that takes more than simply telling the next generation Judaism matters.

Author Sarah Hurwitz makes this point beautifully in her book *As a Jew*. She writes that much of a child's Jewish education happens not in a classroom, but in the home and community. When children see the adults around them joyfully practicing Jewish rituals, eagerly studying Jewish wisdom, and actively participating in Jewish community, they learn something far more powerful than any lesson we could teach them - this is a life worth living.

Zikaron, remembrance in this case, reminds us that we are not the end of the Jewish story. We are one link in a long chain, and it is on us to continue it.

The word *remember* allows us to stretch both backward and forward. Stretch backward and remember all that our ancestors endured, stood for, and fought for so that we could be here today. And stretch forward and remember all there is still to do to lead a proud, joyful, and flourishing Jewish life.

As we enter 5787, may we remember the generations who carried this tradition so that it could reach us.

May we remember the strength that allowed our people to begin again and again.

May we live in such a way that generations from now, those who come after us will be grateful that we carried it forward.

And above all, may we remember to dance, too.

Shana tova!