

### **Introduction**

Last week I looked at the issue of remembrance from a biblical perspective. Thank you to those of you who shared memories with me in response to the last sermon. We looked at some of the problems that arise when there is a lack of appreciation for history. We saw how a lack of a sense of history may condemn us to repeat the mistakes of the past. We also noted that a lack of a sense of history and therefore ignorance about the origin of the things we believe and practice undermines their significance. A lack of appreciation for the past opens the door to hypocrisy and undermines confidence in our faith and practice. We also noted that when we remember we become imitators of God who remembers His covenants and His world. The primary reason the Bible calls us to remembrance is so that we will know God through His acts in history and be imitators of His character.

Today I want to look at the biblical connection between remembrance and action. If you read the commands to remember in Scripture you will notice that the remembrance is always related to an action or duty. It is this element of action associated with remembrance that differentiates biblical remembrance from nostalgia.

We all know the pleasure of nostalgia. Memories of a past experience or relationship that draw near again, albeit fleetingly, yet tantalizingly close so that you could almost relive the moment. Pleasurable though experiences like this may be, they are often an end in themselves, and do not really effect the way we live our lives in the present. I suppose that some Christians have settled for a kind of spiritual nostalgia which is made up of stories and memories but there is not expectation of transformation from them. Remembrance in the bible on the other hand, is meant to be active and life changing.

### **When God Remembers.**

The Bible often says G-d remembered. If you think about it, there must be more to this statement than the blindingly obvious. Of course God remembers He is Almighty and Eternal. So this statement must indicate more than the simple ability to recall.

When the bible says God remembered it is announcing an initiative that G-d is about to set into action. God's remembering has life changing consequences. G-d remembers Noah (Genesis 8:1) and sets the ark to rest thereby saving him and his household. G-d remembered Rachel (Genesis 30:22) and she is transformed from an infertile woman to the mother of Israel (Jacob).

When God remembered His covenant the people of Israel were transformed from a slave population to a nation.

### **Constructive and Destructive Historical Memory**

Historical memory can be used for very destructive purposes and unscrupulous leaders are not beyond using this destructive aspect of memory for their own ends. In the Balkans it was a destructive remembering that caused the peoples of the former Yugoslavia to perpetrate the worst war crimes seen in Europe since the Second World War.

The Israeli/Palestinian problem has a great deal to do with the way in which historical memory has been manipulated and used. Remembering wrongs suffered in a way which feeds resentment and hatred is destructive. To quote Nelson Mandela, "Resentment is like drinking poison in the hope that it will kill your enemies."

### *Constructive use of historical memory.*

God could have said: "hate the Egyptians for you were enslaved by them in their land".

Instead the Torah instructs: "You shall not detest (abhor NIV) an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land" (**Deut. 23:8**). Furthermore, the Torah tells us not to abuse the

stranger, the widow and the orphan "for you were slaves in the land of Egypt" **Exodus 22:21**. In other words, the Torah turned one of the worst historical memories into an impetus for social justice. How you remember is important.

The Jewish People today have possession of their holy city Jerusalem, the capitol of Israel, primarily because they remembered it's Destruction. On Tisha b'Av (9th of Av) they fasted and lamented its loss. In connection with the fall of Jerusalem, three other fast-days were established at the same time as the Ninth Day of Av: these were the Tenth of Tevet, when the Nebuchanezzar's siege began; the Seventeenth of Tammuz, when the first breach was made in the wall; and the Third of Tishrei, known as the Fast of Gedaliah, the day when the governor Gedaliah was assassinated. You can read about all these events in (**2 Kings 25:25; Jeremiah 41:2**).

They observed the Fast of Gedaliah in order to remember specific events related to the Destruction of the city by the Babylonians in 586 BCE.

At weddings they remembered Jerusalem by placing ashes on the groom's head, by reciting the verse "If I forget thee Jerusalem" (**Psalms 137:5-6**), and by breaking a glass.

For centuries Jews remembered Jerusalem at funerals by burying Jews with their feet facing Jerusalem so that when resurrection comes they would be ready to stand up and walk towards the Holy City.

So too, since the thirteenth Century, Diaspora Jews were buried with a small sack of dirt from Jerusalem. And for hundreds of years, Jews have comforted mourners by saying: "May God comfort you among the other mourners for Zion and Jerusalem".

Even though the city is united and restored to Jewish control observant Jews continue to remember the Destruction in 586 BCE and 70 CE by fasting on Tisha B'Av four decades after the city was reunited in the Six Day War. That you remember is important.

For many Jews the remembrance of the Holocaust is so painful, so beyond description that they have become victims to memory. A common feature of this is survivor guilt – the guilt for living when so many died. Painful memories are not healed by forgetting them. The scholar and Holocaust survivor Elie Weisel (of blessed memory) expressed the most profound act of forgiveness humanly imaginable. He expresses forgiveness toward God for the Holocaust. He describes this process in an article in which Elie Weisel asks God the question he has struggled with all his life:

"Where were you, God of Kindness, in Auschwitz?"

He had never been able to understand how a loving God could have allowed the Holocaust to exist. But out of the question that had tormented him for fifty years, Weisel gleaned a sudden insight:

"Watching your children suffer at the hands of your other children, haven't you also suffered?"

In this moment of compassion, Weisel is finally moved to offer God his forgiveness: "Let us make up, Master of the Universe," he says. "In spite of everything that happened? Yes, in spite. Let us make up: for the child in me, it is unbearable to be divorced from you for so long."

Memory can lead us into a deeper understanding of the Lord

### **Remembering and Forgetting**

It seems that there is more to remembrance than simply being the opposite of forgetting. זָכַר Zakar to remember implies that there is special attention

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paid to to the object of remembrance. Usually this attention is accompanied by an action of some sort. The Torah says of God that He "remembered Noah" Genesis 8:1 as well as Abraham Genesis 19:28 and Rachel Genesis 30:22.

This certainly does not mean that God was unaware of them until that moment. This would imply that God had absent mindedly forgotten them, or that He was occupied with other things and too busy to give them attention. Rather, the Torah is indicating that from that moment onwards special providence and close guidance was provided for those individuals. The meaning of remembrance is special attention.

Following the period of Israel's servitude in Egypt, the time comes for their salvation - "And God remembered his covenant... and God knew or took notice. Exodus 2:24-25.

From that moment, Israel was under the Lord's special 'yada' יָדָהּ to know – the same word that is used for the union of husband and wife..

The opposite is "zakaron" forgottenness - not the silence of unconsciousness, but rather the deliberate act of God "hiding His face" (פָּנֵי יְהוָה סָתַר satrat panim) and obliterating us, as it were, from His heart.

"God has forsaken me, and God has forgotten me" – so laments Bat Tzion Isaiah 49:14; and an even better example is provided by the psalmist Psalm 10:11 - "...God has forgotten, He hides His face...".

The state of forgottenness is what is meant by the hiding of God's face, the removal of 'hashgaha' The Hebrew term hashgaha (overseeing) stands for supervision, it is also used as a synonym for hashgaha elyonah (Supervision by the Almighty, i.e. Divine Providence) Hashgaha Pratit , commonly translated in English as Divine Providence, follows each person like a shadow, protecting and guiding each human being, and according infinite value to each individual. Its presence is invisible, but it is the One with which we commune - for it is with us at all times..., with its terrible consequences: "I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them..." Deut 31:17.

Thank God that He remembers us for mercy and that He has not turned His face away from us.

When we remember, and that act of remembrance has a positive transforming effect on our lives then we are imitating God and using memory for His glory.