

# Broken Tablets and Senior Moments

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*for Doris and Ben Levin*

Have you ever experienced what we like to call a “senior moment”? You know what I mean: one of those times when you have no idea where your car keys are... and so you begin to search for them... and you get caught up in looking at yesterday’s mail... then the phone rings... and then you have a nosh from the refrigerator... and then you head outside to get into the car... before realizing that you forgot your car keys. That’s okay, of course, because by this time you don’t recall where you were headed anyway. The next day, you find your car keys in the refrigerator next to the orange juice and the butter.

Or perhaps on occasion you simply find yourself saying, “Oy, you know, my memory’s not what it used to be. Furthermore, there’s also the fact that my memory’s not what it used to be.”

Perhaps the greatest gift that any of us ever received is the gift of our minds. Consider the wonders of the human brain, the source of our thinking and dreaming and imagining and philosophizing and remembering. A billion years of evolution have given each of us a most wondrous computer inside our heads, vulnerable and complex. In biblical times, people thought that the heart was the seat of the intellect and that the kidneys were the source of all our emotions; we know of course that all our mental processes are rooted in that remarkable package that makes up 2% of the body’s mass, but sucks up over 20% of our body’s energy consumption.<sup>1</sup> “Enormously powerful and potato-chip fragile at the same time, the brain is able to collect and retain a universe of knowledge and understanding, even (sometimes) wisdom.”<sup>2</sup>

And the finest brains are capable of amazing feats. We may joke about forgetting our keys somewhere, but consider how we are capable of calling up obscurities when we need to. Think about the guy who calls the sports-radio call-in show every week with endless pieces of arcane trivia about Red Sox history from the 1940’s.

Think about this: Consider the ultimate masterpiece of Jewish literature: the Babylonian Talmud. Now, the Talmud is the size of a set of encyclopedias, a massive collection of law, history, midrash, stories, ethics, and dialogues between generations of teachers and pupils. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Talmud has been printed in the same manner, called the Vilna Shas – that means that virtually every edition of the Talmud has the same pagination. They say of the greatest Talmudic sages that you could pick a word on a page, any page – say, page 10. You could stick a pin through that word on the page, piercing through the book, and these great scholars could tell you what word is being penetrated on, say, page 60.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, New York: Broadway Books, 2003, p.442.

<sup>2</sup> David Shenk, *The Forgetting; Alzheimer’s: Portrait of an Epidemic*, New York: Anchor Books, 2003, p.23.

Indeed, the human memory is capable of incredible acts. Emerson said, “We estimate a man by how much he remembers.” While I don’t think a Jew would phrase it that way, it is true that with our emphasis on the religious value of education, Jewish brains are celebrated for feats of extraordinary memory.

Now, consider this: The year is 1901. The place: Frankfurt, Germany. One November morning, a man appears at the renowned psychiatric hospital there, with his fifty-one year-old wife in tow. He presents her to the doctors. Though the woman has no family history of mental illness, for some time she has suffered from a bundle of symptoms including memory loss, making surprising mistakes during what should be familiar routines, and sudden emotional bursts of anger and rage. With sadness, the man tells the doctors that he is no longer able to provide adequately the care that his love needs.

On the day after she arrives at the institute, the woman is brought to the office of one of the physicians, who begins to interview her.

“What is your name?” he asks, and the patient replies, “Auguste.”

“What is your last name?” he asks her, and she answers, “Auguste.”

The doctor asks, “What is your husband’s name?” and she looks at him expressionless and replies, “Auguste.”

“How long have you been here?” he queries, and, upon reflection, she says, “Three weeks.”

The physician observes her symptoms and behaviors, an unusual mixture for a woman her age. He calls her by name—“Auguste”—and asks her to write it down on a piece of paper. She takes up the pen and attempts to do so, but becomes disoriented, and asks him to repeat the name. “Auguste” he says, and she writes the first couple of letters, before getting frustrated. She releases the pen, looks up at him with solemn and fearful eyes, and she says, her voice barely a whisper **“I have lost myself.”**

The physician, fascinated by her case, commences to study Frau Auguste in-depth for the next four and a half years, until her death.

His name is Alois Alzheimer.

The disease which came to be linked with his name is no stranger to many of our families. It is estimated today that 4.5 million Americans have Alzheimer’s disease, a number that has doubled since 1980, and it is a number that, as the baby boomer generation ages, will multiply in the next few decades.<sup>3</sup> Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia that strikes our elders, impairing a person’s ability to learn, make judgments, and to remember.

Of course the progression of Alzheimer’s disease is tragic and painful for those who suffer from it, for it is terrifying to slowly lose the trust in our faculties that enable us to navigate the world. The Hebrew word for “forgetting” is נכח. It has been pointed out that those are exactly the same letters of the word חשך, which means “darkness.”<sup>4</sup> The dimming of the light of memory is extremely scary.

And as loved ones slip away slowly, Alzheimer’s becomes just as tragic for family and caregivers. We watch the excruciatingly gradual withdrawal and degeneration

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.alz.org/AboutAD/statistics.asp>

<sup>4</sup> Edward Horowitz, quoted in Joseph Lowin, *Hebrew Talk*, Oakland, CA: EKS Publishing, p.186.

of people who have been living full, rich lives. Part of its devastation is that first, awful day, when you reach out to your spouse, or your grandparent, or your sibling, and you realize that they don't know who you are. There are people in the room this morning who know the pain of reaching out to hold Mother's hand, even when she has lost the ability to recognize you.

Can there be any pain like the pain of caring for a parent who can no longer care for himself? It's not the way the world is supposed to be, we cry out. Mom and Dad are supposed to be there to care for us, not the other way around.

The Rabbis of old had a proverb: **“When we were young, we were told to act like grown-ups. Now that we are old, we are treated like infants.”**<sup>5</sup> I've taught that text to elders before, and I've seen them nodding in agreement. And yet, part of the tragedy of Alzheimer's is, indeed, the way it turns children into the caregivers, and parents into the dependents.

The Talmud says that “Honor your mother and father,” is the most difficult Mitzvah in the entire Torah.<sup>6</sup> Some of us know precisely what the Rabbis of old meant by that – even to the degree of having to let go by letting others care for our parents our grandparents, and allowing that to be the fullest degree of honoring them.

In one of the Talmud's most heartbreaking images, a question is asked: We know that Jewish tradition places an enormous value on honoring our elders. How do we know that this honor applies even to an elder who has lost his memory through the ravages of age? And the answer is given: we know this from the Torah, from the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness. After all, it is taught, **both the whole tablets of the Law and the broken fragments that Moses smashed were placed in the *Mishkan***, the Tabernacle that was carried from station to station in the desert.<sup>7</sup>

Anyone who has nursed an elderly parent or grandparent understands what the tradition is talking about. The broken tablets are the perfect metaphor for the broken memories of loved ones who shared our lives, until the fog of dementia settled in.

Now, it is not true that mental decline is automatically part of aging; far from it. For everyone in the room who has ever grasped for a vocabulary word from everyday life or the name of someone whom we really ought to know, we know how we laugh it off with a joke about “having a senior moment.” But the truth is that our brains and our memories do *not* automatically deteriorate with age. True, most of us won't arrive at our Final Destination in the manner of Moses, of whom the Torah says, *Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated* (Deuteronomy 34:7).<sup>8</sup> But a healthy brain and old age can most certainly be compatible with one another, and we all know examples of elders who prove this every day.

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<sup>5</sup> Talmud, *Bava Kamma* 92b

<sup>6</sup> Talmud, *Kiddushin* 31b

<sup>7</sup> Talmud, *Berachot* 8b

<sup>8</sup> On Moses's “eyes were undimmed,” Jeffrey Tigay writes, “Biblical and other ancient texts commonly describe the eyesight and other faculties of the aged to indicate whether they have remained healthy or become feeble.” (Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy*, p.338). Regarding “his vigor unabated,” Tigay notes that the text literally reads “he has not dried up,” and says that despite his years, Moses's flesh was smooth (no wrinkles!) and he did not look aged. Others interpret it to mean Moses remained sexually virile.

Jewish tradition places extraordinary value on *remembering*. Think of the Havdalah ritual that closes Shabbat and Yom Tov. The idea of Havdalah is to allow the sweetness of Shabbat linger with us into the work-week-to-come. How do we keep the memory of Shabbat alive? With wine, with the twisted Havdalah candle, and, most importantly, with sweet *b'samim*, the smell of fragrant spices. Now look how brilliant Jewish tradition can be: The sense of smell is more intricately linked with memory than any other sense. Therefore, it is the smell of spices that carry the memory of Shabbats past. It is remarkable to note that Alzheimer's patients often lose their sense of smell along with their memory. In fact, a simple scratch & sniff exam is one of the early warning tests for the onset of Alzheimer's disease. Our sense of smell and memory are inextricable from each other.

Consider all the times in our tradition when we are commanded to remember. *Zachor*, insists the Torah: Remember! In the Ten Commandments it says,

זָכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ / Remember Shabbat to keep it holy. At Passover we tell our story, remembering each detail of the Exodus saga.

We are commanded to remember our spiritual home:

יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי אִם-אֲשַׁכְּחֶךָ / "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!" says the psalm.<sup>9</sup>

The Rabbis tell us there are six things that we are supposed to remember every single day of our lives. They are: (1) the Exodus from Egypt; (2) the attacks of Amalek, our enemy; (3) standing at Mount Sinai; (4) the sin of the Golden Calf; (5) the rebellion of Korach in the desert wilderness; and (6) the precious gift of Shabbat.<sup>10</sup>

And there is much more. We know we are commanded to remember the lessons of the Holocaust, for instance. We are commanded to remember our loved ones when we say the Kaddish and light yartzeit candles. On Yom Kippur and other holy days, we pray the Yizkor service – the name means, "Remember." We place great stock in our ability to remember. We are people obsessed with memory.

Perhaps that's why we shrug off those "senior moments" with such a nervous laugh. And maybe that amplifies the pain of losing a loved one to Alzheimer's or any similar sort of disease that slowly deletes a person's mental hard-drive, with all of its attendant back-ups.

I think often of a friend of mine named Monty Rosenbusch, *alav ha-shalom*. Monty died a number of years ago from cancer. I visited him in the hospital at the time Heidi and I were engaged to be married, in 1998, and he would pepper me with questions about our wedding plans. Monty was a drummer in klezmer bands that often played at weddings, so he had a particular interest in the ways in which we planned to celebrate our Simcha.

At the time he asked me, "So, have you hired a videographer yet?" I remember telling him how I had so often seen the videographer interfere with the wedding ceremony and that Heidi and I weren't really planning on having a video made of the event.

Monty pulled himself up in his hospital bed and looked me squarely in the eye. "You schmuck!" he said. "The video isn't for you. It's for your grandchildren."

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 137:5

<sup>10</sup> Learned from *Mishkan T'filah* (uncorrected proof), p.98. To be published in 2006.

We hired the videographer that week.

In the spirit of the Jewish value of Remembering, I ask you today to take Monty's lesson – and the Mitzvah of *Zachor* – to your hearts. If you are a grandparent or a great-grandparent, please, please sit with your children and record your memories for the next generation. If you are a grandchild or a great-grandchild, please, please begin recording the stories of your elders.

Many of us have in our homes a pair of candlesticks, or a Kiddush cup, or a snatch of a swaddling-cloth or a blanket that someone before us brought over from the Old Country. For us third- and fourth-generation American Jews, these become every year a more precious echo of a disappeared time. They are also the stuff of which our history, our families, and our very selves are composed. Can you imagine what it would be like to have a DVD of your great-grandparents' wedding?

It is my hope that every member of our community will find the time to document their family's stories. Perhaps this time of the year, when families are together for the holidays, will provide the opportunity to do exactly that. Or perhaps these Days of Return can provide the groundwork to plan another time in the near future, when the work of documenting your family's saga can commence (if it hasn't already).

This is the day called Yom HaZikaron: The Day of Remembering. On Rosh HaShana we assert that G-d remembers all life on earth, just as G-d remembered Noah, just as G-d remembered Sarah. We remember the special responsibility that comes with the gift of being Jews.

What of those whose memory is gone, erased like a deleted hard-drive? We take their memories with us, as part of our shared story. As Rabbi Milton Steinberg has written:

**G-d remembers! All our ancestors live in us. Though their tongues are silent, they speak with ours. Though their hands are still, they labor through us. The past lives in us, in our very bodies. The structure of our organs, the energy that moves our muscles, the nerves and brain with which we apprehend our world, are all an inheritance from generations that have passed.**

**G-d remembers! And the past lives in our souls...in our society and folkways...in our culture...in our Jewish heritage. The past is not dead. It lives in us and in our world. This is how we shall live when we have departed this world. So let us then live that the remembrance of us be for good and not for evil, for a blessing, not for a curse.<sup>11</sup>**

This is the Day called Yom HaZikaron: the Day of Remembering. We remember, and we pray that as G-d remembered Sarah, G-d remembers us. We unabashedly call G-d *Avinu*: Our Parent. We stretch out our hands and our spirits in G-d's direction and pray: Please, do not forget us in the year ahead. Remember us. Know us. Make us whole. And in the remembering, may there be blessing and hope for the New Year to come.

Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Milton Steinberg, adapted, in *Mahzor Hadesh Yameinu: Renew Our Days*, Rabbi Ronald Aigen, ed., 2001, pp.311-312.