

Rosh HaShana Family Service

Rosh HaShana 5767

Temple Shir Tikva

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I think often of a friend of mine named Monty Rosenbusch, *alav ha-shalom*. Monty died a number of years ago from cancer. I would visit 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?” The videographer – that’s the person who walks around with a camera at a wedding so you can watch it on your DVD player when you get home later. 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 fool!” he said. It made me jump back about seven feet. “The video isn’t for you. It’s for your grandchildren.”

We hired the videographer that week. Monty was speaking my language.

This day, this Rosh HaShana, is known by several different names in our tradition.

It’s been called, obviously, **Rosh HaShana** – the beginning of the year.

It’s also called **Yom Teruah**, which means the day of the sounding of the shofar.

Most unusually, it’s also called **Yom HaZikaron** – the Day of Remembering.

And it’s that third meaning that I’d like us to reflect upon today.

Memory is a very precious part of being a Jew. There are many Mitzvot in the Torah that begin with the word *zachor*, which means: “Remember!” For instance, the Torah says, *zachor et yom ha-shabbat l’kodsho*: Remember Shabbat to keep it holy.

We remember our spiritual home: *Im eshkeich yerushalayim, tishkach yemini*: “If I forget you O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither.”

We are commanded to remember the Shoah, and we are commanded to remember family members who have died by reciting the Kaddish. As Jews, we do a lot of remembering.

That doesn’t mean we live in the past. What it means is: the past lives in us.

To illustrate what I mean by that, I need everyone in the room to think about two words. These are the words: ANCESTOR, and DESCENDENT. An ancestor, of course, is someone who lives in a previous generation in a family: a parent, or grandparent, or great-grandparent. A descendent, on the other hand, is the opposite: it’s the person who comes in a generation that comes *after*, a child or a grandchild or a great grandchild.

And here's the question I'd like to ask you: Which one are you? Are you an ancestor or a descendent? Think about it for a minute; maybe it's not as obvious as it might seem.

After all, obviously everybody in this room is somebody's descendent. We couldn't have gotten here otherwise, not without the long chain of people who came before us. We are all descendants.

But if you think about it: aren't we ancestors, also? What about all the Jewish people who are yet to come, but G-d willing will be here someday: our students, and our students' students; or, our grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great grandchildren.

I think very few people consider themselves to be ancestors. Especially young people, especially children, who are too busy being descendants.

But today is a day for thinking about how life spreads out in both directions, forward and backwards. And on Rosh HaShana, we think about the history of our people as a long chain spread out in those directions. One link in that chain is you and me.

And what I'm wondering today is, how would our lives be different – how would we behave differently – if we thought of ourselves as ancestors besides descendants, and if we considered what our responsibilities are to people who will come after us – even a long time after us?

Here's a story about the Mitzvah of Zachor / the commandment to Remember:

Once upon a time there was a thriving, prosperous city set in the middle of a large plain. One summer, while the people of the city were busy thriving and prospering away, a strange old woman arrived at the gates. She carried in her arms twelve large ancient-looking leather-bound books, which she offered to sell to them. She said the books contained all the knowledge and all the wisdom of the world, and that she would let the city have all twelve of them in return for a single sack of gold.

Now, the people of the city thought this was a very funny idea. They said she obviously had no conception of the value of gold and that probably the best thing was for her to go away again.

This she agreed to do. But before she departed she said she was going to destroy half of the books in front of them. She built a small bonfire and burnt six of the books of all the knowledge and all wisdom in the sight of the people of the city. And then she went on her way.

Winter came and went, a hard, difficult winter, but the city just about managed to flourish through it. Spring came, and then summer, and then one day the old woman was back.

"Oh, it's you again," said the people of the city. "How's the knowledge and wisdom going?"

"Six books," she said, "just six left. Half of all the knowledge and wisdom in the world. Once again I am offering to sell them to you."

"Oh, really," they scoffed at her.

"Only the price has changed now."

"We're not surprised." (Isn't that how it always is?)

"Two sacks of gold," she said.

"What?"

“The price has gone up. Two sacks of gold for the six remaining books of knowledge and wisdom. Take it or leave it.”

“You know, it seems to us,” said the people of the city, “that you can’t be very wise or knowledgeable yourself or you would realize that you can’t just go around quadrupling an already outrageous price in a buyer’s market. If that’s the sort of knowledge and wisdom you’re peddling then, frankly, you can keep it. At any price.”

“Do you want them or not?”

“No.”

“Very well. I will trouble you, please, for a little firewood.”

She built another bonfire, and burnt three of the remaining books in front of them and then set off back across the plain.

That night, one or two curious young people from the city sneaked out and sifted through the embers to see if they could salvage the odd page or two, but the fire had burnt very thoroughly and the old woman had raked the ashes. There was nothing left.

Another hard winter took its toll on the city and they had a little trouble with famine and disease, but trade was good and they were in reasonably good shape again by the following summer when, once again, the old woman appeared.

“You’re early this year,” they said.

“Stands to reason,” she explained, “There’s a lot less to carry.” She showed them three books she was still carrying. “A quarter of all the knowledge and wisdom in the world. Do you want it?”

“What’s the price?”

“Four sacks of gold.”

“You’re completely mad, old woman! Apart from anything else, in case you hadn’t noticed, the economy is very tight right now. Sacks of gold are completely out of the question.”

“Firewood, please.”

“Now wait a minute,” said the people of the city, “This isn’t doing anybody any good. We’ve been thinking about this and we’ve put together a small committee to have a look at these books of yours. Let us evaluate them for a few months, see if they’re worth anything to us, and when you come back next year perhaps we can put in some kind of a reasonable offer. But be warned: we are not talking sacks of gold here, though.”

The old woman shook her head. “No,” she said. “Bring me firewood, please.”

“We won’t.”

“Fine,” she said, with a shrug. “The books will burn quite well by themselves.” And she set about shredding two of the books into pieces which then burnt quite easily. She set off swiftly across the plain and left the people of the city to face another year.

Winter was brutal.

She was back in the late spring. “Just one left,” she said, putting it down on the ground in front of her. “One left, all that remains of all the wisdom and knowledge that has been preserved.”

“How much?” said the people of the city.

“Sixteen sacks of gold.”

“We’d only budgeted for eight.”

“Take it or leave it.”

“Wait here.” The people of the city went off into a huddle and returned half an hour later.

“Sixteen sacks is all we’ve got left,” they pleaded. “Times are hard. You must leave us something.”

The old woman hummed to herself as she started piling the kindling.

“All right!” they cried at last, opening up the gates of the city, and led out two oxcarts, each laden with eight sacks of gold. “But it had better be good.”

“It is good,” said the old woman. “I wish you had seen the rest of it.”

She led the two oxcarts away across the plain with her, and left the people of the city to survive as best they could with the one remaining twelfth of all the knowledge and wisdom that had been in the world.¹

This story means many things. I first learned it in the context of the environment, especially about animals and plants that are disappearing off the face of the earth unless we learn how to protect them.

But I think this story is also about Jewish memories. The memories and heritage of our families are simply not always going to be there. Our job today is to realize that a special gift – knowing the story of our family – is right there, waiting to be seized. But we have to learn the stories.

In the spirit of the Jewish value of Remembering, I ask you today to heed my friend Monty’s lesson, and this story’s lesson – the Mitzvah of *Zachor* – and take it 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 get a video camera and 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- and fifth-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).

The stories of our lives are extremely precious. They have to be remembered, and they have to be preserved. Here’s the way one of the great Jews of our time, Elie Wiesel, says it:

He said, “My father, an enlightened spirit, believed [very deeply in the goodness of man]. My grandfather, a fervent Hasid, [put all his trust in G-d]. My father taught me to speak, my grandfather taught me to sing. Both loved stories. And when I tell mine, I hear their voices. Whispering from beyond the silenced

¹ Douglas Adams & Mark Carwardine, *Last Chance to See*, London: Pan Books, 1990.

storm, they are what links the survivor to their memory....Why did G-d create human beings? Because G-d loves stories.”²

This day is called Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Remembering. We hear the sound of the shofar and we are called to remember all the amazing things that have taken place in our lives and in our people’s history. On this Yom HaZikaron, when G-d remembers all of Creation, we are called upon to be like G-d, and remember as well. May each of us learn to be a faithful receiver of what has come before us, and a loyal transmitter of those stories to generations yet to come.

Amen.

² Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, New York: Summit Books 1972, frontispiece.