

LOSS, REMEMBRANCE AND FORGETTING

THERE IS A COMFORT THAT COMES WITH FORGETTING BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

“THE PAIN DOES NOT GO AWAY, BUT LINGERS SOMEWHERE BELOW THE SURFACE OF EVERYTHING, SWIMMING AND CIRCLING PATIENTLY LIKE A SHARK, UNTIL SUDDENLY THE TIP OF THE DORSAL FIN BREAKS THROUGH THE SURFACE AND ALL TOO QUICKLY REMINDS US THAT WE HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN.”

IF YOU ONLY HAD ONE HOUR IN THIS WORLD, HOW would you spend it? In some ways we were blessed. I know that might sound funny. After all, what kind of blessing is it to know that your newborn baby is going to die shortly after birth – to have been told by doctors that there is nothing that can be done to save her, and to have been instructed by rabbis to daven that she should pass quickly and without any suffering.

But the ability to brace oneself, to make preparations, to plan how those precious few moments would be spent – although it may be hard to appreciate for someone who has not been through it – all of that truly

was a blessing. Just imagine the initial shock of parents of a newborn baby who, unbeknownst to them is gravely ill, witnessing their child being whisked away from them, as test after test is performed, and the utter devastation and loss when they are told that the child, who they had so looked forward to holding (let alone raising), has passed away in another room – cold and alone on an examination table. Much of the pain that we experience in life is a result of unrealised expectations. To know what to expect and to be able to plan accordingly is a tremendous chesed (kindness) from Hashem.

Hard as it may be to accept, even illness itself is something for which we must be thankful, as it too serves a purpose – giving us time and prompting us to prepare for the inevitable and to set things right as best we can. The midrash¹ brings that Avraham intro-



duced old age; Yitzchak suffering; and Yaakov illness. Yaakov asked for illness to be introduced into the world. He said: "Hashem – if a man dies without illness (ie, he just suddenly passes away without warning), then he does not settle his affairs with his children. But, if he were ill for two or three days, he would settle his affairs with his children."

Hashem answered: "You have requested something good, so it will begin with you." And so it is written: "And it came to pass after these things that someone said to Yosef, 'Behold, your father is ill.'"² And King Chezekiah introduced repeated illness; up to that time, a person experienced only one illness and this illness preceded his death. Chezekiah said to Hashem: "You have kept man in good health until the day of his death. But, if a man falls sick and recovers, falls sick and recovers, he will do teshuva (repent)."

Hashem answered: "You have requested something good, so it will begin with you." And so it is written³: "The writing of Chezekiah, King of Yehudah, when he had been sick and had recovered from his illness."

For a baby who lives less than 30 days, there is no levaya⁴ (funeral), no shiva⁵ (seven-day mourning period), no mourner's kaddish⁶, no shloshim (30-day mourning period), no yahrzeit (marking of the anniversary of the date of someone's death), and no yizkor (memorial service read on Yom Kippur and the three festivals – yizkor literally means 'remembrance'). In fact, parents are often advised not to be present for the burial or even to know the location of the grave (and the prevailing custom is not to mark such a grave). The message from all of this is loud and clear: such a loss is not something to be remembered.

Forgetting, however, is an entirely different matter.

We are frequently admonished in the Torah regarding remembering and forgetting. Some things we are commanded to remember with great frequency: for example, yetzias Mitzrayim (the exodus from Egypt), which we are obligated to recall each and every day, both in the morning and in the evening, and which we fulfil via the recitation of the Shema.⁷ Some things



we are commanded to remember with less frequency: for example, Shabbos, which we remember each week upon its arrival and departure.⁸ And some things we are commanded to remember quite infrequently: for example, what Amalek did to us when we were leaving Egypt, which the Sefer HaChinuch teaches needs only to be remembered, at most, annually (or even every two or three years).⁹

But what does it mean for us to remember something? Or, for that matter, not to forget something? The gemara¹⁰ teaches, regarding the obligation to remember what Amalek did to us, that forgetting is with the heart – but remembering is with the mouth (ie, something spoken). From our sages, it is clear that our Torah obligation to remember various events is fulfilled by a repeated recitation of words – with the frequency of the repetition dependent on what precisely we are being asked to remember.¹¹ Our sages also asso-

ciate remembrance with telling something over to others or making something known to them so that it can be recounted to future generations (ie, so that the memory should be perpetuated).¹²

Remembering requires us to speak about what took place, to put words to the events, and to put our thoughts into tangible, intelligible, and concrete pieces of information. But it is difficult to capture in words all of the feelings – the sensory experience: the smells, sights, sounds, etc, associated with a particular event – and our description is often but a mere figment compared to the depths of what exists inside us. For example, when we think of what Amalek did to us, do we recall it with the same type of visceral response that we do when we think of what the Nazis, yemach shemom v'zichrom (may their names be blotted out), did to us, even though most of us thankfully lack firsthand experience of those events?



“THE TRUTH IS THAT SOMETIMES I THINK IT MIGHT BE BETTER IF THE MEMORY WOULD JUST GO AWAY – IF WE COULD HAVE THE COMFORT THAT COMES WITH FORGETTING”

Forgetting, on the other hand, our sages teach involves actively and knowingly removing an event from our hearts (or souls).¹³ Regarding certain events (eg, Amalek), we are actually commanded not only to remember what transpired (ie, to recite something verbally from time to time), but actually to ensure we do not do anything actively on our parts to ever forget it (ie, not to erase our feelings or to uproot from our hearts the memory of what transpired).¹⁴ In other words, forgetting isn't just about having something slip our minds – eg, “Sorry honey, I forgot the milk” – in which case the memory of the thing is still there (ie, I know my wife told me to pick up some milk), but I have just failed to act on it and call it to mind at the appropriate time. Rather, forgetting means to actively and to completely remove the particular idea from its very existence within me (ie, my heart or soul), so that it can no longer be called to mind even when prompted by someone (eg, my wife saying, “Where's the milk that I asked you to get?”) or something (eg, an advertisement for milk) about it.

And that's just it – although we do nothing to perpetuate the memory of the loss of our baby; although we do not speak about it with any great frequency; although nothing is formally recited or done (eg, kaddish, etc) – the fact is that, barring attempts to actively remove it from our hearts (which would likely be unsuccessful), it will never be forgotten. And at times when we feel sad or a bit down for no apparent reason, if we actually sit and reflect on the cause, it is almost always connected in some way to that experience. And, consequently, the pain does not go away, but lingers somewhere below the surface of everything, swimming and circling patiently like a shark, until suddenly the tip of the dorsal fin breaks through the surface and all too quickly reminds us that we have not forgotten, in spite of our having done nothing to perpetuate the memory – even without all of the formal trappings of mourning – it simply does not go away.

And the truth is that sometimes I think it might be better if the memory would just go away – if we could have the comfort that comes with forgetting. 

Footnotes

¹Bereishis Rabbah 65:9; see Bava Metzia 87a

²Bereishis 48:1

³Yishayahu 38:9

⁴Shulchan Aruch Y.D. 344:8

⁵Shulchan Aruch Y.D. 374:8

⁶Shulchan Aruch Y.D. 344:4

⁷See Rashi on Shemos 13:3; Rambam Hilchos Kria Shema 1:3

⁸See Shemos 20:8; Sefer HaChinuch – Mitzvah 31

⁹See Devarim 25:17; Sefer HaChinuch – Mitzvah 603

¹⁰Megilla 18a

¹¹See Sefer HaChinuch – Mitzvahs 31 and 603; Ramban on Devarim 24:9;

¹²Cf. Ramban on Devarim 24:9

¹³See Megilla 18a; Sefer HaChinuch – Mitzvahs 603 and 605; Cf. Devarim 4:9 and the Ramban's commentary on that pasuk

¹⁴See Devarim 25:19; Sefer HaChinuch – Mitzvah 605



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