

The Poetry of Jewish Memory

Drisha Institute for Jewish Education

Session 1: 4/18/23

1) What is Jewish Memory?

Jonathan Safran Foer:

“Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing ... memory. While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks – when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather’s fingers fell asleep from stroking his great-grandfather’s damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knife point to be sure Isaac would feel no pain – that the Jew is able to know why it hurts.

When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: What does it remember like?”

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi:

“Although Judaism throughout the ages was absorbed with the meaning of history, historiography itself played at best an ancillary role among the Jews, and often no role at all; and, concomitantly, that while memory of the past was always a central component of Jewish experience, the historian was not its primary custodian.

...

It may help to point out...that in repeatedly employing such terms as "collective memory" or "group memory" I do not have in mind some vaguely genetic endowment, not an innate psychic structure analogous to the Jungian archetypes.... Only the group can bequeath both language and a transpersonal memory.... Even individual memory is structured through the conscious efforts and institutions of the group.

שמות כ':ח' - זְכוֹר אֶת־יְוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ

Exodus 20:8 - Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

A Hasidic Tale via SY Agnon via Gershom Scholem:

“When the Baal Shem Tov had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire, and meditate in prayer—and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the Maggid of Mezritch was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say: we can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers—and what he wanted done became reality. Again a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassow had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs—and that must be sufficient: and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his chair and said: we cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And the story which he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three.”

Overall: rather than answering the question, “what is Jewish memory,” we can treat this question as a guide through the following poems, asking this of each poem. How does a particular poem attempt to answer this question? What arguments are each of these poems making about the nature and experience of Jewish memory?

Jewish Poems of Catastrophe

Psalms, 137:

עַל נְהָרוֹת | בְּכֹל יַם יִשְׁכְּנוּ גַם-בְּכַיִּנוּ בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת-צִיּוֹן:

By the rivers of Babylon,
there we sat,
sat and wept,
as we thought of Zion.

עַל-עַרְבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ תִּלְיֵנוּ כְּנִרוֹתֵינוּ:

There on the poplars
we hung up our lyres,

כִּי יָשָׁם שְׂאֵלוֹנוּ שׁוֹבֵי־נוּ דְבַר־יְשִׁיר וְתוֹלְלֵינוּ שְׁמַחָה וְשִׁירוֹ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן:

for our captors asked us there for songs,
our tormentors, for amusement:
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”

אֵיךְ נִשְׁיֵר אֶת-שִׁיר־יְהוָה עַל אֲדַמַּת נָכָר:

How can we sing a song of the LORD
on alien soil?

אִם-אֲשַׁכַּחךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח מִיָּגִי:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither;

תִּדְבַק-לְשׁוֹנִי | לְחִכִּי אִם-לֹא אֲזַכְּרֶיךָ אִם-לֹא אֶעֱלֶה אֶת-יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֵאשׁ שְׁמַחָתִי:

let my tongue stick to my palate
if I cease to think of you,
if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory
even at my happiest hour.

זָכֹר יְהוָה | לְבָנֵי אֲדוֹם אֵת יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם הָאֲמָרִים עָרוּ | עָרוּ עַד הַיְסוּד בָּהּ:

Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall;
how they cried, "Strip her, strip her
to her very foundations!"

בַּת-בָּבֶל הַשְׂדֻדָה אֲשֶׁרִי שִׁשְׁלֵם-לָהּ אֶת-גְּמוּלָהּ שְׂגַמְלָתָהּ לָנוּ:

Fair Babylon, you predator,
a blessing on him who repays you in kind
what you have inflicted on us;

אֲשֶׁרִי | שִׂיאָחֻז וְנִפְץ אֶת-עַלְלֵיהּ אֶל-הַסֶּלַע: {פ}

a blessing on him who seizes your babies
and dashes them against the rocks!

Robert Alter: "No moral justification can be offered for this notorious concluding line."

David Rosenberg's translation of this psalm:

Into the rivers of Babylon
we cried like babies, loud
unwilling to move

beyond the memory
the flowing blood
of you, Israel

to an orchestra of trees
we lent our harps
silently leaning

when the enemy shoved us
"asking" tender songs of Israel
under heavy chains

"give us songs of Israel!"
as if we could give our mouths
to a strange landlord...

If I forget thee
sweet Jerusalem
let my writing hand wither

my tongue freeze to ice
sealing up my voice
my mind numb as rock

if I forget
your kiss
Jerusalem on my lips...

My lord
remembers you, Edomites
Jerusalem raped vivid as daylight

you who screamed to strip her
strip her naked
to the ground

Oh Lady Babylon
Babylon the destroyer
lucky man who holds you

who crushes you
who opens your mind
to wither instantly in air

who holds up your crying babies
as if to stun them
against solid rock.

Jacob Glatstein, translated by Barnett Zumoff:

from **I Keep Recalling**

I want to recall these additional things:
The individual, smaller Holocausts
That ripened in me;
The silent misfortunes that rose in me
Like small frightened suns,
And gradually set....

Miklós Radnóti, translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsvath and Frederick Turner:

Letter to My Wife

Beneath, the nether worlds, deep, still, and mute.
Silence howls in my ears, and I cry out.
No answer could come back, it is so far
from that sad Serbia swooned into war.
And you're so distant. But my heart redeems
your voice all day, entangled in my dreams.
So I am still, while close about me sough
the great cold ferns, that slowly stir and bow.

When I'll see you, I don't know. You whose calm
is as the weight and sureness of a psalm,
whose beauty's like the shadow and the light,
whom I could find if I were blind and mute,
hide in the landscape now, and from within
leap to my eye, as if cast by my brain.
You were real once; now you have fallen in
to that deep well of teenage dreams again.

Jealous interrogations: tell me, speak.
Do you still love me? will you on that peak
of my past youth become my future wife?
--But now I fall awake to real life
and know that's what you are: wife, friend of years,
--just far away. Beyond three wild frontiers.
And Fall comes. Will it also leave with me?
Kisses are sharper in the memory.

Daylight and miracles seemed different things.
Above, the echelons of bombers' wings:
skies once amazing blue with your eyes' glow
are darkened now. Tight with desire to blow,
the bombs must fall. I live in spite of these,
a prisoner. All of my fantasies

I measure out. And I will find you still;
for you I've walked the full length of the soul,

the highways of countries!--on coals of fire,
if needs must, in the falling of the pyre,
if all I have is magic, I'll come back;
I'll stick as fast as bark upon an oak!

And now that calm, whose habit is a power
and weapon to the savage, in the hour
of fate and danger, falls as cool and true
as does a wave: the sober two times two.

Szilárd Borbély, translated by Otilie Mulzet

from **The Sequence of Isaac Taub**

Why is this night different from all other nights?--
Otto Moll, Oberscharfuhrer, asked himself,
and searched for the answer.

From the south a breeze arose
on the Polish plain, and drifted into
the rose colors of twilight above

the chimneys, the fragrance
of fresh springtime earth. One didn't know
where it came from, ascended, blotting out the chimneys'

choking stench. Why is this night
different from any other night,
asked Otto Moll within himself

for the second time, as he watched the rows
of people filing before him, sent to the right
or to the left. Why do I feel that

God is here, even if I know
that's impossible? But then why is this night
so different? If the history of Israel is

the succession of cause and effect,
then who am I, Otto Moll,
within it?

Linda Pastan:

The Cossacks

for F.

For Jews, the Cossacks are always coming.
Therefore I think the sun spot on my arm
is melanoma. Therefore I celebrate
New Year's Eve by counting
my annual dead.

My mother, when she was dying,
spoke to her visitors of books
and travel, displaying serenity
as a form of manners, though
I could tell the difference.

But when I watched you planning
for a life you knew
you'd never have, I couldn't explain
your genuine smile in the face
of disaster. Was it denial

laced with acceptance? Or was it
generations of being English--
Brontë's Lucy, in *Villette*
living as if no fire raged
beneath her dun-colored dress.

I want to live the way you did,
preparing for next year's famine with wine
and music as if it were a ten-course banquet.
But listen: those are hoofbeats
on the frosty autumn air.

Richard Chess:

Holocaust Day

Why cease our mourning?
So what if years have passed, if years
Are slabs on which condos have been built
And we've moved in.
The distance between us
And the immeasurable is no more
Than the distance between two rooms, even
If the wall is a heaving ocean.
When the coffee in our cup's disturbed,
We believe a bone in a mound of bones
A continent away has shifted
To trigger this local tremor.
When we're moved to kiss a stranger
On the street, we feel true
To a young couple long ago interrupted.
Our neighbors never can be just neighbors.
We embrace them like family:
They will betray us to the dogs
That roam the neighborhood,
The gentlemen who read our meters,
The flag snapping on Independence Day.
Like saplings planted in barren yards,
Our lamentations will mature
Long after we have crumbled.

Aviya Kushner:

Night on Wellington Avenue, Chicago

To Germany,
from its German citizens, 1913. Another night
and I am a walker
in the night, a wanderer reading.

The Jewish neighborhood is graced by that odd monument,
and the night is laced with Isaiah, with the juxtaposition
of horrifying prophecy and soft wind.

Is it all exile, all the cities of earth awake
and all the lovers of inexplicable cities walking,
thinking if they just keep moving
it will all be calm,

just keep moving and the body and the mind will exhaust
into sleep?

And I watch as
men hold hands outside a bar,
and women hope for salvation, their whole bodies
one big ear, listening,
asking always that awful phrase
Do you love me? Do you love me?

And as the wind winds
down and the bartender yells last call
I wonder if anyone is really in or if all of us
are always out, out, out, wanderers like
an unwanted prophet, an old man raving.

Yehuda Amichai, translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell:

Huleikat - The Third Poem about Dicky

In these hills even the oil rigs
are already a memory. Here Dicky fell
who was four years older than I and like a father to me
in times of anguish. Now that I'm older than him
by forty years, I remember him like a young son,
and I an old grieving father.

And you who remember only a face,
don't forget the outstretched hands
and the legs that run so easily
and the words.

Remember that even the road to terrible battles
always passes by gardens and windows
and children playing and a barking dog.

Remember the fruit that fell and remind it
of the leaves and the branch,
remind the hard thorns
that they were soft and green in springtime,
and don't forget that the fist, too,
was once the palm of an open hand, and fingers.