

My father's yahrzeit was 2 weeks ago, and I am giving this d'var in his memory.

Those of us who have suffered the loss of someone whom we have loved deeply realize that we are in a unique sort of club. If nothing else, we have shared many similar feelings and experiences. We know, for example, that time does in fact heal many wounds. We also know that one of the profoundest wounds we suffer is the absolute inability to recollect our loved ones in their full, complete selves. In other words, I don't just miss my father, or miss the ability to share exciting, wonderful news with him, which those who haven't suffered a loss might think is the largest sense of loss. For me, my biggest loss is that I miss, in a sense, my memory of him.

It has been 18 years since I have heard my father's voice, seen his face, felt his hug or his hand in mine. One of the most significant problems with that is that I milk my old memories for him, and those memories become stale, worn, and stiff with use. I am unable to create new memories. And my old memories of him are not that easily accessible, or sometimes I dwell on the 3 months he was sick, which seems to be particularly cruel.

Proust, the French writer, famously wrote about memory when he describes an incident involving consumption of a tea-soaked madeleine. You're probably familiar with the outlines of this episode in Proust's epic novel *In Search of Lost Time*, even if, like me, you've never read a word of Proust: the adult narrator eats a madeleine dipped in tea, and it reminds him so much of childhood afternoons at his aunt's home that his mind summons a never-ending series of images and stories from decades earlier, sparking more than 3,000 pages of recollections. The sequence is apparently so powerful and lovely that it's inspired countless spoofs. It's also inspired more than a few scientific works on memory, which have generally agreed that taste and smell may indeed provoke spontaneous recall of richly-textured information stored deep within the brain - a phenomena called "involuntary memory." This idea of involuntary memory sounds appealing and romantic, but somehow it hasn't work that way for me, at least in relation to people I love who have died. I wish I had a flood of involuntary memories that fill my soul when eating a particular food, but that simply doesn't happen. Perhaps it didn't really happen that way in Proust, too. A recent article in the journal *Memory Studies* claims that most studies of the madeleine episode paraphrase the text so selectively that crucial aspects of the experience are omitted, making it appear as if the narrator remembers his childhood

immediately after tasting the madeleine. In fact, the study says, the madeleine gives him a glimpse of a pleasure he cannot identify, which he associates with afternoons in his aunt Leonie's kitchen only **after** he "tries 10 times to reach it, resisting the laziness of letting it go." So the familiar story we have in our minds is wrong. For that reason, the madeleine episode may actually be an example of *voluntary* memory, actively retrieved by the narrator. Memory, in other words, needs to be worked at.

This resonates much more with my own experience. At the most moving yizkor service I ever attended, which took place on Pesach at Camp Ramah in Ojai, the Rabbi led all of us in a guided meditation where we spent a focused amount of time recalling our loved ones, meeting them once again in a room, touching them, speaking with them. It was extraordinary. Through that meditation, I not only remembered my father - I created new memories of him, memories that were real and legitimate - as real as any actual remembrances of things past. Let's face it - our memories are far from perfect. So perhaps manufactured memories are as legitimate and important as "real" memories. Perhaps even Proust's narrator didn't recall anything that actually happened.

This concept of manufactured memories becomes particularly relevant when thinking of Judaism and its focus on collective memory. Memory, as professor and writer David Roskies observes, is a collective mandate in Judaism, both in terms of what is recalled and how it is recalled. We are commanded to remember that we were slaves in Egypt, remember the days of old, and remember what Amalek did. We remember the destructions of the Temple in Jerusalem, our exile from the land. These memories are crafted for us about things we personally never experienced. How can these collective memories actually work - how does our tradition make this happen?

One familiar way we do this is through carefully orchestrated ritual (the Pesach seder, the 2 challot on Shabbat, etc.). Another, perhaps less familiar way is suggested in this week's parsha - through reading the Torah and fully imagining the physical descriptions of the narrative. At the end of Mishpatim, this week's parsha, Moses reads the covenant aloud to the people - literally to the "ears" of the people, and they reply, famously, "Naaseh vnishmah," we will do and obey. Then Moses takes the blood and dashes it on the people while saying "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord now makes with you concerning all these commands." I would like

to focus on - the “reading to the ears” of the people, and the sprinkling of the blood on the people.

First, why does the text say that Moses reads “into their ears”? What a strange construct. According to Aviva Zornberg, by doing so, Moses evokes an intimate desire, perhaps like a lover whispering into his beloved’s ear. I’d like to expand on that. Perhaps engaging the aural sense directly can produce and evoke memory, just like smells can be similarly evocative and transformative. Steve reminded me of a time when our children were little, and they would whisper to us – a very powerful way of reaching us, perhaps because of the actual physical movement of the air, or perhaps because of the direct communication into our ears.

As far as the sprinkling of the blood, the Rabbis disagree as to whether this blood was actually sprinkled upon the people and their clothing or whether it was just sprinkled on the twelve stones of the altar. While logically it is unrealistic for there to be enough blood to sprinkle on the clothing of every Jew, Rashi holds this to be the case, and this blood seals the covenant. Imagine the sensation of blood being sprinkled upon all the people. Covenants are serious business, and this covenant is particularly serious, carrying on ad infinitum for generations.

In order to fully enter into this covenant, then, it seems like many physical senses of the people must be tapped and realized: their ears must feel the whisper of the requirements, and their bodies must feel the sprinkle of the lifesource of precious animals and smell the blood’s powerful odor. Setting up a covenant in this way - with physical reminders that we can imagine - helps us develop and maintain a collective memory.

Memory is complex, inaccurate, and elusive. Despite this, I think that memory is one of the few essential elements that makes us human. Without memory, we cannot trust, we have no stories to tell, and we cannot love. But memory does not just flood to us or come easily; as Proust’s narrator teaches us, we need to “resist the laziness of letting go” and try over and over again to recall memories - and perhaps create new ones - that help us maintain the essence of our past. When I “resisted the laziness” and thought of my father, I felt my hand in his and felt the warmth of his loving gaze on me – well worth the effort of voluntary memory.

This is likewise true for collective memory. I'd like to suggest that if memory of real events is what makes us human, collective memory of our narrative is what makes us Jewish. Our tradition adds physical events to help us conjure up memories to make them more real and more individual for us. We feel and smell the blood; we hear the text whispered in our ears. Every time we read the Torah we have the opportunity to reject any stale memories and forge new memories so that our relationship to God and to our tradition stays ever new.