10

God's Memory

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DOES GOD HAVE A MEMORY? Why of course, we are tempted to respond; in fact, God has a perfect memory. But a moment's reflection reveals how problematic such a notion would be. For to have a perfect memory—presumably because past, present and future are all the same for a Being existing in an eternal now—is to have no memory at all, since one does not remember the moment we call now, one simply lives in it. Perfect memory self-destructs into incoherence.

The Bible knew better than that. It endows God with a memory, but not a perfect one. God remembers Noah in the ark, but when he makes a covenant with Noah, he provides himself with a visual aid: "I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow is seen in the cloud, that I will remember my covenant" (Gen. 9:13–15). So the rainbow jogs God's memory. It is a kind of arched string around the divine finger. Using the same terms, *ot brit*—sign of the covenant—God provides another visual sign, that of circumcision, for his covenant with Abraham. And sometimes God writes notes to himself, a list of names to cherish and remember, worn on the garments of his special

assistant. In Exodus 28:29 we read that "Aaron shall carry the names of the children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment on his heart when he goes in to the holy place, for remembrance before the Lord continually."

It is not only catching God's eye that assists divine recall; auditory reminders also play a role. In Numbers 10:10 we read, "On the day of your joy, and on your festivals, and on your new moon days, you shall blow with trumpets over your burnt and peace offerings, and they shall be to you for a reminder *(le-zikaron)* before your God." Most significantly, when God remembers the Children of Israel after many years of bondage, it is an acoustic phenomenon that calls them to mind. "And it came to pass in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died; and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up to God from their bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Exod. 2:23–24).

Given this evidence that divine memory needs jogging, it is not surprising that those who beseech God are often anxious about securing their place in His memory. Thus Hannah in her prayer for a son says, "O Lord of hosts . . . if you will remember me and not forget your maidservant, but will give thy handmaid a man child, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life" (I Samuel 1:11), and indeed, when the narrator announces that her wish was granted we are told, "and the Lord remembered her" *(va-yizkereha)* (v. 19). How fitting, then, that in the synagogue, this chapter of First Samuel is read on Rosh Hashanah, New Year's Day, the Day of Judgment, known in the Pentateuch as *zikhron teruah* (Lev. 23:24)—the day of memory, of sounding the horn, perhaps the day of sounding the horn to evoke memory.

Part of the task of the biblical prophet is to remind God of his

promises. After the episode of the golden calf Moses pleads, "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob your servants" (Exod. 32:12). In the face of Israel's sins and the looming threat of God's wrath, the prophet intercedes by evoking the memories of the beloved patriarchs and the promises made to them. Indeed, every true prophet of Israel must be willing to confront God's anger, challenging him to arouse the compassionate side of his nature.[1] It is in this spirit of prophetic intercession that we read Habakkuk's poignant plea to God, "in wrath, remember mercy" (3:2).

The Bible knows the terrible truth that "in the day of his anger [the Lord] did not remember his footstool [=the Sanctuary]" (Lam. 2:1). So the greatest consolation that the prophets offer Israel is that God does indeed remember them. Dovetailed between Jeremiah's dire warnings and withering critiques of Israel are the tender words of assurance that God has not forgotten the earlier, happier days of their relationship: "Thus saith the Lord: I remember for your benefit the affection of your youth, the love of your espousals; how you went after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown" (Jer. 2:2). And among the images of glorious restoration and salvation at the end of the book of Isaiah, we find that God has set watchmen on the walls of Jerusalem to remind him constantly of his promises to the city: "Ye that are the Lord's remembrancers, take ye no rest, and give [the Lord] no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth" (Isa. 62:6–7).[2]

The biblical figure who displays the most anxiety about God's memory and his place in it is Nehemia. Nehemia asks God to remember him, four times: "Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people" (Neh. 5:19); "Remember me

1. On this theme, see Muffs 1992, 9–48.

2. See note of Slotki 1961, 303.

o my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God" (13:14); "Remember me, o my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to thy abundant love" (13:22); and finally, the very last words in the book, "Remember me, o my God, for good" (13:31). What is the source of this incessant concern for God to remember him? Moses asked God to remember the patriarchs and the covenant, but never did he ask God to remember his own good deeds, even when he pleaded with God to be allowed to enter the Promised Land.

The rabbis of the Talmud disapprove of Nehemia's imploring God to remember him, seeing it as evidence of pride and self-satisfaction (Sanhedrin 93b), but I would like to cast a more favorable light on this aspect of his character. The book of Nehemia (originally one work with the book of Ezra) is among the latest books of the biblical canon, along with Chronicles, Daniel, and Esther. These Second Temple works display certain commonalities of language and theological approach (as well as significant differences).[3] For our purposes here it is important to note that while God manifests his will, presence, and power quite openly in the early books of the Bible, as we move forward through the Tanakh there is a gradual receding of the divine presence, a "hiding of the face."[4] By the time we reach the Persian period and the books that emerge from that era, God plays little or no overt role. As many have observed, he does not appear at all in the book of Esther. The situation in Nehemia, while less extreme, is similar. God never makes an appearance in the book, nor is he explicitly heard from. Nehemia frequently invokes God's name and prays—indeed his prayers are inspiring and exemplary—but in the book we are never told God's response in

3. See Talmon 1987, 357–64.

4. See Friedman 1995, 207–22, cf. Miles 1995.

words. Nehemia succeeds in his plans to rebuild Jerusalem and to reform the religious life of the people, but the question of whether his success is owing to divine providence or to Nehemia's courage, leadership, and diplomatic skills is never resolved.[5] In earlier books of the Bible, the prophetic word or the voice of the narrator makes it clear where God's sympathies lie, but neither is heard in the Nehemia memoir.

Nehemia was, according to his self-description, a man who came to seek the welfare of the Children of Israel; he attributes the origin of his plans, he tells us, to "what God put in my heart to do for Jerusalem" (2:12). But surely he knew, and he knew that others well understood, that there was no proof that his plans were the result of divine inspiration. When he rebukes the nobles for their exploitation of the poor, he says, "then I consulted with myself" (5:7). In the end, his book and his entire project—the foundation for Second Temple Judaism—is his consultation with himself.

Prophets do not appear in the book of Nehemia, excepting false ones, who attempt to trick him into an action that would humiliate and discredit him (Neh. 6:10–14). When Nehemia institutes a census, he says, "and my God put it into my heart to gather together . . .

5. Nehemia is acutely aware at all times that he serves at the sufferance and pleasure of the Persian authorities, and that his plans would come to naught without their support. See Neh. 1:11–2:8. Even at the triumphant moment when the walls of Jerusalem have been built and the people enter into a solemn covenant to place the Torah at the center of their reconstituted life, Nehemia frankly acknowledges that they have no political independence, and are "servants this day" (9:36) to Persia. It is quite astonishing that at this moment of what should be supreme celebration, Nehemia underscores the subservience of the people and the land, which "yields much increase to the kings which you [=God] have set over us because of our sins; also they have power over our bodies, and over our cattle, at their pleasure, and we are in great distress" (9:37).

the people" (7:5), but when a family of priests of questionable lineage presents itself, wishing to partake of the priestly perquisites, Nehemia is forced to tell them that "they should not eat of the holy things until there would rise up a priest with Urim and Thummim" (7:64). Of course, that never did happen. Priests there were, they wore priestly vestments, but the oracular power of the Urim and Thummim described in Exodus was never restored.[6]

And there is yet a greater, more fundamental omission. The schematic design of both the desert tabernacle and Solomon's temple is that of a nested series of rectangles (outer rampart or screen, courtyard, sanctuary, holy of holies). The focal point of the entire system was the ark of the covenant with the tablets written "by God's finger" in the Inner Sanctum. Now the restored temple of Ezra and Nehemia had the gates, the courtyards, the altars, the offerings, and the holy of holies, but the ark of the covenant was missing. The rituals of atonement were enacted, the sacrifices were brought, but the center was empty.[7] What a hasidic master was many

6. The Talmud (b. Yoma 21b; cf. 39a–b) lists five features of the First Temple that were absent in the second; among these are the Urim and Thummim, and, significantly, the Shekhinah itself. In general, rabbinic sources see Second Temple Judaism as a time of self-acknowledged decline and self-imposed surrender of the trappings of spiritual power. Note, for example the statement in Yoma 39b that early in the Second Temple period (after the death of Simeon the Just), the priests refrained from using the Tetragrammaton when blessing the people; according to Rashi, this was because they felt they were unworthy (*"she-lo hayu kedai"*).

7. The full significance of this fact is not always grasped. Why, indeed, was there nothing in the holy of holies? Why did the priests in the early, formative days of the Second Temple—when the religious and political situation was still inchoate and fluid—not simply make an ark and place it in the holy of holies? It is hard to imagine that the thought did not occur to them. The temptation would have been great to buttress their claims to legitimacy and continuity with the putative presence of the ark of Moses. Who would have gainsaid their assertion or challenged its authenticity? The fact that the priests and leaders of the Second Commonwealth oversaw the reestablishment of the Temple and its cult, but omitted the key element mandated by the Torah, must be seen as an extraordinary act of self-restraint, an acknowledgment of the limited, partial nature of their project of restoration. On the other hand, it also suggests a profound confidence in the ongoing covenantal relationship with God, which could dispense with even the most essential tangible artifacts if they were not available. Israel of the Second Commonwealth was the people that had so much confidence in God's ongoing love for them that they had the courage to reject ersatz substitutes for what had been lost, but which (they firmly believed) would one day be restored. Perhaps this is the meaning of the enigmatic verse in Jeremiah (3:16), "And it shall come to pass, when you are multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, saith the Lord, They shall say no more, 'the ark of the covenant of the Lord; neither shall it come to mind; neither shall they make mention of it; neither shall they miss it; neither shall it be made any more.' "

Our suggestion, then, is that the Judaism of the Second Temple was consciously constructed as a religion of absence, in line with the realities of political powerlessness (see previous note).

Hardly any writers have pointed to the absence of the ark as a remarkable fact. See, however, W. Jackson Bates (1970), who writes, "The Ark of the covenant was gone, and no one felt at liberty to try to replace it with a substitute." A most helpful discussion of the differences between the first and second "Houses" is that of Simon Rawidowicz (1974, 81–209). He insightfully points to the "second house" as an era of "limitation," but he does not explore the theme we have developed here.

8. I am referring to Judah Leib Alter of Gur; see Green 1996.

centuries later to call "the innermost point" was gone.[8] As a sensitive and insightful religious man, Nehemia must have wondered whether the whole enterprise was worth it, whether it was even justified, or whether perhaps the restored temple was but a lifeless reproduction, a copy of what once was but could not be again.

He wondered, but still he proceeded. As has been said of Lincoln, he took a guess in twilight. He knew his work would always be tentative, provisional, unfinished, and open to recision. Most trou-

bling of all, he understood that by placing a written document—the Torah—at the center of the renewed faith of Israel (see Neh. 8–9), he was to some degree repudiating the religion of the First Temple at the very time he was working to remember and recapture it. For to remember in writing is to freeze, and to freeze is to extinguish and to eternalize at once.[9]

So Nehemia asks God, again and again, to remember him for good. He yearned for the divine voice of assurance but it was not forthcoming. In asking God to remember, he asks for confirmation of his life and his work. He consoles himself with the thought of God's memory, but he lives in a world of uncertainty where the wisdom of one's best intentions is imponderable, even in retrospect. He lives, in short, in our world. In some sense, he—along with Ezra—is the maker of it. We can well understand why he is anxious, and why he asks God to remember him for good.

Given this anxiety over God's memory, which is an inherent part of Nehemia's legacy to the Judaism that followed him, it is not surprising that the rabbinic prayer book, based on talmudic sources, both asserts that God remembers everything and yet implores God, again and again, to remember us and our loved ones.[10]

For the medieval Jewish philosophers with their abstract and conceptually austere view of the deity, there was less concern about God's memory than about divine foreknowledge, which seemed to rule out human freedom of will. In a famous passage in *Mishneh Torah*,

9. This point is made with particular elegance and force by Annie Dillard (1987, 70–71).

10. This is particularly apparent in the High Holiday liturgy; see below.

Maimonides asserts that the two are not contradictory: while God knows what is going to happen, humans are still free to choose, and they are responsible and accountable for their actions. But Maimonides makes no mention of divine memory. Evidently the notion of divine memory would carry a much more anthropomorphic coloration than does divine foreknowledge. Humans have memory but no foreknowledge—and perhaps that was enough to ensure that Maimonides would see memory as unworthy of God. Memory is a human function, not an abstract, impersonal one. It is an expression of personality, always relational, directed, volitional. Only a person can engage in the active, constructive, and creative activity we call memory.

The philosophical approach to Judaism soon provoked a reaction known as the Kabbalah. The kabbalists taught that along with the unknowable transcendent divinity referred to as Ein-Sof, divinity self-manifests in ten stages known as *sefirot*. In the view of the kabbalists, it is the realm of the sefirot that is the true referent of the God of the Bible, the God in whose image man is made, who knows joy and anger, love and disdain, who is anchored in the world of place and time. As the thirteenth-century kabbalist Rabbi Azriel of Gerona put it, "Ein-Sof is perfection, lacking nothing. But if you say that [the divine] operates in the infinite but has no power in the realm of finitude, you thereby diminish divine perfection" (Shatz 1997, 30).[11] Just as God's power is in the domain of the unbounded, so does it reach into boundedness and limitation. If you do not allow God to penetrate the world of limits and finitude, you actually limit his perfection.

11. Shatz 1997, 30; see also ibn Gabbai 1992, chap. 8, 1:17. Cf. Dan and Kiener 1986, 90.

It is this God who remembers—and who needs to be reminded.[12]

Here as elsewhere, the kabbalah combines aspects of neoplatonic thought with mythic elements of the Jewish tradition to breathe new life in the biblical image of God that had nearly succumbed to the rigorous constraints of medieval religious rationalism. The return to the personal God of the Bible is completed in the hasidic movement. Hasidism absorbed the entire legacy of Jewish thought, but embraced with special enthusiasm those early strata, the Bible and the rabbinic *aggadah*, which emphasize the personal nature of God, with whom one can relate in dialogue, who is deeply involved with human beings, their destiny, their problems and concerns.

The Hasidim understood that God, to be God, must be implicated in time. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev (1740–1809) comments on a verse in Habakkuk (a fragment of which we have already quoted), "revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy" (3:2). He writes, "When Israel is suffering they cry out to God for mercy. At such a time, the individual in prayer must attach his thought and his prayer to God. In response, God attaches himself to them and shows compassion. This is what Habakkuk means when he says, "revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known": that is, suffering takes place in time, for in the transtemporal realm there is no suffering, no agony at all. So we ask God to invest himself in time, to come to know temporality and suffering, and therefore to understand our situation as we experience it. Then,

12. Memory is generally associated with the *sefirah Yesod*. See Cordovero 1586, 23:7. In contrast, forgetting is usually associated with the *kelipot*, the forces of darkness. See Cordovero 1586, 23:21.

as the verse concludes, God—even in the midst of wrath—will remember compassion.[13]

For Levi Yitzhak, divine memory and divine compassion depend on God's vesting himself in time, and this vesting in turn depends on human prayer, which is human consciousness directing itself and binding itself to God.

It is worthwhile pausing to consider what Levi Yizhak might say to Nehemia, so anxious over whether God would remember him. In light of the teaching just presented, we might surmise that he would say something like this: If you wish to secure your place in God's memory, you must keep God in your heart and mind at all times, for the divine and human memories are mirror images of each other.

But beyond this mystical notion of God-consciousness, so characteristic of early Hasidism, there is a moral dimension as well, in which God's mind is not the mirror image of man's, but the inverse of it, the photographic negative of it. This concept emerges from a teaching of Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov (1745–1807), known as the "father of widows and orphans," who spent much of his life helping the needy and redeeming from prison people falsely accused of crimes.

There is a lengthy section of the Musaf liturgy for Rosh Hashanah called "*Zikhronot*," or "memories," which begins "You, God, remember all the deeds done in the universe and you recall all the creatures fashioned since earliest times." Toward the end of this section, we find the phrase *ki zokher kol ha-nishkahot attah hu me-olam*—"for you, God, remember all things forgotten from time everlasting."

Rabbi Moshe Leib explains: God remembers all things forgotten, but the converse is also true: God forgets all things remembered.

13. Kedushat Levi on Exod. 2:25 (Parashat Shemot, s.v. "*o yevo'ar va-yar'*," p. 87 in the Jerusalem 1978 ed.)

Whatever we forget, God remembers; but whatever we remember, God forgets. Consider our mitzvot, our good deeds. If we remember them with pride and self-satisfaction, if we consider them our ticket to heaven or to a life of honor here on earth, then God forgets them. On the other hand, if we forget them, not claiming virtue for ourselves or special privilege in consequence of our good deeds, then God remembers those good deeds and cherishes them. Now consider our sins. If we forget them, if we forget the wrongs we have done, the harm we may have caused, if we feel no remorse, then God remembers. But if we remember our misdeeds, looking upon them with deep regret, actively working to make amends and to change ourselves for the better, then God forgets those misdeeds. So, Rabbi Moshe Leib concludes, truly is it said that God only remembers what we forget.[14]

In light of this teaching let us consider what Rabbi Moshe Leib might say to the biblical Nehemia. We can imagine him saying: Nehemia, you are anxious about God's remembering you for good? You wish to secure your place in history? Then give your achievements away. Surrender them as a gift to God and to your people. For the surest way to remove them from God's heart is to hold them with preciousness in your own.

This brief survey of sources points to a notion of God's memory as a social construct, an intergenerational armature of linkages anchored in moral commitment to communal stability and spiritual vision. But if God's memory is a social construct, then are we not, as

14. This teaching, originally an oral tradition, eventually found its way into twentieth-century hasidic anthologies, including Yeushson 1956, 26–27.

Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach said, making God (and his memory) in our image?

The Hasidim would say that this is the truth, but it is not the whole or final truth. For why do we wish to make God in our image, why are we capable of conceiving of such a God, if not for the fact that we indeed have the spark of the divine within us. We can only imagine transcendence because we are made in God's image, as Genesis told us long ago.

The hasidic texts on the reciprocity of memory thus far presented have focused largely on the mutual relationship between God and the individual of faith. But the biblical understanding of divine memory suggested by Nehemia moves from the individual to the collective, for Nehemia's entire project is the reestablishment and strengthening of his community and its sacred centers, especially Jerusalem and the Temple. Nehemia's own personal destiny is important only insofar as he subordinates it to the destiny of his people and respects its sacred ideals more than his own life.[15]

This communal dimension of divine memory is elegantly articulated by one of the boldest and most creative of all the hasidic masters, Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica (1801–1854), commenting on Malachi 3:16: "Then they who feared the Lord spoke to one another; and the Lord hearkened and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for those who feared the Lord and took heed of his name." According to Rabbi Mordecai Yosef, the social setting of Malachi 3:16 is a group of friends who enjoy each others' company and who elevate their camaraderie by

15. See Neh. 6:11. On another occasion I hope to write about this verse and its theory of leadership, especially in comparison to the leadership model of Moses. The comparison focuses on Num. 20, especially 20:6.

directing it to a sublime purpose. When they meet they discuss matters of the spirit, giving and receiving advice on advancement in the service of God, sharing spiritual insight and wisdom. To the extent that these words of wisdom are embraced by the community of seekers, then they are inscribed in God's memory book. For, says Rabbi Mordechai Yosef, God's memory book is "the totality of the hearts of the Children of Israel." [16]

God's memory is a tapestry strung on the loom of human hearts.

Let us return once more to Nehemia, the royal cupbearer and advisor, religious reformer, builder, and governor of Judea. Or perhaps we should be less charitable and call him an activist or—most unkind of all—a politician. Did God remember him for good? We cannot presume to know the mind of God. All we do know is that the book of Nehemia was preserved and cherished as sacred scripture by the Jewish people. The canonization of the memoir is an implicit judgment on the man and his work. Ben Sira would later speak of Nehemia as one "whose memorial is great; who raised up for us the walls that were fallen, and set up the gates and bars, and raised up our homes again" (49:13). Nehemia's "remember me o my God for good" ends the penultimate book of the Hebrew Bible, and dovetails thematically with the last words of the last book of the Bible, Second Chronicles: "the Lord his God be with him, let him go up." [17] In light of the teaching of Rabbi Mordecai Yosef, we might say that Nehemia's concern to be remembered by God is not egotistical

16. Mei ha-Shilo'ah, Likkutei ha-Shas, Berakhot 11b, s.v. *Hitkinu* (in the Bnei Brak 1995 edition, this text is in 1:238).

17. On the connection between Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles, see Blenkinsopp 1988, 47–54.

self-indulgence, but a plea that the collective energies of his people should foster sacred ties of filiation, vectors pointing with quiet faith to a shared future.

In the end, the decision of the Jewish people has always been to rebuild after catastrophe, to resolve all doubts on the side of reconstruction and renewal, knowing full well that the effort to remember the past and to build for the future is the final confirmation of the irretrievability of the past—and still to go ahead.

God's memory is what impels us to action and buttresses our hopes in the face of the abyss. But God's memory is a meaningful concept only through the collective decision of the people to preserve memories as sacred, to cherish them, and, most importantly, to study and teach and transmit them.

To conclude: if God has a memory at all, it is because we give him ours.

But what, then, does God give us? The two things that make memory worth having: a vision of integrity and the courage to hope. And perhaps these two things are not so different from what a master teacher gives his students.

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