

TETZAVVEH SHABBAT ZAKHOR

In the grounds of the Manor House in North London, the home of Leo Baeck College, there stands a memorial pillar to the victims of the Shoah at the top of which are carved the four Hebrew letters, *zayin*, *khaf*, *vav* and *reysh* which spell the word *Zakhor*. In our Room of Prayer we have a Shoah light with six candle holders on which the same letters are carved, and they are on the Ark too, so that the message of *Zakhor* is everywhere imprinted on our brains.

Zakhor, of course, means Remember!, and it is something that an age-old people like us does very easily, because we often see the present refracted through the lens of the past, and we remember, or act as if we remember, events of which we have no direct experience, because having happened to Jews like us they feel as if they form part of our personal back story.

In no aspect of Jewish life is the concept of Remembrance stronger than at the High Holy Day services, when on Rosh Hashanah we read ten verses of Remembrance, *Zi khronot*, before the blowing of one set of calls on the shofar, and on Yom Kippur, whose penultimate service is entirely focussed on Remembrance. But we also have this Shabbat, the one before Purim which is called *Shabbat Zakhor*, on which since time immemorial we have been enjoined to remember the deeds of the evil Amalekites, a desert tribe who attacked the Israelites when they wandered in the wilderness and were damned by the Torah for all time as a result.

The Torah's response is an injunction which demands perpetual loathing at best and a commitment to genocide at worst, with neither of which any right-thinking person would be comfortable.

Yet we also know that forgetting can be very dangerous, and not just for us, for when societies forget the lessons learned by painful or terrible experiences in the past the outcomes can be dreadful. One of the facts of life that never ceases to horrify and fascinate me in equal measure is the eventual implosion of dictatorships: no matter where it is, no matter how apparently powerful the leader in question, their demise and that of their regime is inevitable because without the popular will acquiescing to the executive's decisions a society is founded on

fear rather than consent, and therein lies the seeds of its ultimate collapse.

Equally, as the appalling tragedy of Syria's civil war goes on and on without let up, even though we know the Assad regime and all its hangers-on are doomed, should also know that many thousands may yet die before the regime is extinguished, and when that has happened what will be left will be a destroyed country with a traumatised population prey to whichever group within is able to organise itself the fastest.

Perhaps though there is a problem inherent in remembering: that problem is not that the act of remembering is hard, it is that it is human nature to remember selectively. We have no problem remembering the negatives, especially those from which we have suffered; we have no problem remembering the positives, especially the triumphs we have enjoyed, often at the expense of others. But with those recollections which offer instruction and guidance, or those which carry difficult lessons for us to assimilate, we are much less precise and much more prone to selective memory loss.

For me, and others in my family situation it is not selective memory loss that is at the forefront of our minds but unavoidable memory loss, specifically that which is the most pronounced and distressing, the manifestation of dementia.

Late last year I received the news that my mother had suffered her fourth brain seizure and been rushed to hospital. In a peculiar way this did not trouble me unduly, partly because I was reassured by the care home where she lives that she had regained consciousness before the ambulance took her to A&E, but also because I knew the form – seizure, black out, return to consciousness, trip to hospital for tests, back to the home and nothing more.

However, when I visited her that same evening I was not prepared for what happened.

My mother has been in a care home now for several years, and this year she will be 80 years old. Over those years I have seen her change completely, and if I let it get to me it would be heart-breaking. But by and large I stay strong because I have long accepted what has happened. Then again, although I haven't been able to talk properly to her for years my mother has always had

a memory trigger on my visits – either my face, or my voice, or something I have said. It didn't add up to much but it did make me feel that on some level, even in such a tiny way, we still had a connection, that I still had a mother.

That evening, though, I came face to face with a new reality: my mother no longer had a clue who I was and nothing I could do to reach out to her worked. She had left me at last, and when she took herself to bed and I tucked her in I asked her whether I could kiss her goodnight. I was concerned that the face of a stranger reaching down towards her might have disturbed or distressed her, so I asked my mother for permission to kiss her goodnight...it was at one and the same time bizarre and profoundly upsetting, the thing I know I shall remember when she has, mercifully, been able to shake free of her non-existence and leave this life for good.

Last weekend in the paper I read a quote from a man who told his daughter that the secret of a good marriage was the sharing of memories. It really made me think...not just about the importance of memory on so many different levels in our lives, or the ways in which we take this faculty for granted, or misuse and abuse it, but about how precious memories are to each and every one of us and how important it is to do the things that become good memories whenever the opportunity presents itself rather than put it off to another day, or time. The writer added that her father died when she was quite young, but she put down the fact that she had sustaining memories of him to his having done so much with her when she was young, creating bonds of love and shared memory that even death could not sever.

So on this *Shabbat Zachor*, it is not a message about the enemies who have beset the Jewish people throughout history that I want to share, nor about anti-Semitism, or the contemporary relevance of the festival of Purim which we shall regroup and celebrate tonight, it is about **memory**: memory as a cross-generational connection, memory as a source of strength and courage, memory as a source of laughter and tears, memory as a source of inspiration.

Don't, whatever else you do, take memory for granted, it is, on every level, one of the most precious and fragile faculties that human beings possess. *Zachor*, remember your memories, *Lo Tishkach*, do not forget.

AMEN

CRS

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