

We are about to chant the musaf amidah which is a long, unique, and central part of the High Holiday liturgy. It contains 3 special sections: *Malchuyot* (God's kingship), *Zichronot* (God's remembrances) and *Shofarot* (shofar blasts that herald redemption). Each of these sections is comprised of 10 biblical verses and each culminates with the sounding of the shofar.

But it is *Zichronot*/the remembrances section that I am going to focus on today. Rosh Hashana is—after all—also known as *Yom haZicharon*/the day of remembering—not only for God, who remembers our deeds in the metaphorical Book of Life—judging our fates for the coming year— but also for us. It is our time to remember and reflect on our own behavior—the good and the bad— and do *teshuvah*—or return to our better selves.

Memory is a funny thing—some memories gradually fade and ultimately disappear and some memories become sharper, stronger, sometimes changing with time, and even can leave a lasting mark on both our relationships and sense of self. Some memories elicit negativity and pain, while some lift us up, and help us to move ahead with new understanding and perspectives.

This I learned when I was teaching child development at Montclair State University. Every year—in our unit on children of school-age— I gave my college students an assignment:

First they had to describe their most positive or most negative memory from their own elementary school years. Then they had to use this memory as a learning experience: What did it teach them about children? How could the insight be helpful to them in the future?

Over the years, I got a range of stories—both positive and negative. The positive ones had memories of teachers or other adults who helped and supported them, when they felt stupid or lonely or unheard, and made them feel worthy and more confident. One woman told of the day she came to third grade wearing new glasses and her classmates mocked her, calling her “4-eyes.” Then the teacher brought her to the front of the classroom, took her own glasses out of her purse and celebrated with the whole class the joy of being able to see better, or the grown man who remembered the 5th grade teacher who believed in him, tutored him, and made him believe in himself.

But you will probably not be surprised that the negative stories outweighed the positive, and these were more vivid and dramatic. There were memories of embarrassment, humiliation, failure, or rejection— being accused of something they did not do, being made to feel stupid because they did not understand something, being targeted and excluded by the mean kids or bullies, sometimes suffering the anger of adults and not knowing why. One person remembered that a 2nd grade

teacher had violently thrown his desk to the floor because it was so messy, or another who remembered a 4rd grade teacher who she described as “just awful” When the child asked a question, the teacher responded “How dumb can you be!” And for many years after, my student believed she was.

Some of these stories the students wrote about were heartbreaking; others were inspiring. But what I found most inspirational was the effect these memories-positive and negative- had on the students so many years later. And even more amazing to me was that by reflecting on their past experiences, these students gained not only greater understanding on what children need and want, but also insight into themselves. The student who suffered with that terrible teacher revealed that she now aspired to be a social worker who worked with children who suffered from abuse and trauma, and she added “If a child that I come across has dealt with negativity, I would reassure them how smart, kind, and caring they are and how much they matter.” The student whose teacher had believed in him so many years before wrote, “I plan to go into teaching so I can do the same for the children I teach.

My students’ stories gave me insight into the power of memory and how transformative it can be. In a sense, by reflecting on their memories and learning from them, they were doing what we might call *teshuva* – returning – making positive changes in their lives.

And that is what **each of us** is directed to do every year at Rosh Hashana. It is the day of remembering – *Yom HaZikaron* – and just as my students were instructed, we too are asked to focus on our own memories – the highs and lows, the successes and failures, the gains and losses, what brings us joy and what brings us pain, what we wish to remember and what we hope to forget, and what we need to ask forgiveness for. As we prepare to face God’s judgment, we have an opportunity to review and process our own history, reflecting on our past experiences, and learning from them. That is why we start the new year by remembering the past year. It gives us a chance to turn our memories of the past into an action plan for the future – to begin our own *teshuva*.

We are a people of rememberers, and God is our chief rememberer. According to tradition, on Rosh Hashana God takes stock of the deeds of every creature on earth and judges them. And every year as we chant the verses of *Zikronot*, we are asking God to give us new chances to be better, and remember us with compassion and mercy, just as God remembered our ancestors. **On this holiday of beginnings, may we examine our memories and start the year with new perspectives that help us to change and grow – and I fervently pray that in the year to come, God will remember us, our nation, our land, and our world for goodness and peace. Shana Tova**