

Remembering Home

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By Rabbi Samantha Natov

Before we are born, we contain the knowledge of everything in the world. We hold the wisdom that came before us. We know all of life's sorrows and all of its joys. We know only too well the inclinations of people, both good and bad. We know the staggering beauty and expanse of God's creation. And we know the holiness of Torah. We know what it is to love, to be abandoned, to be lifted up and held. We know it all.

But right before we are about to be born, an angel comes to us and taps lightly on the space between our lips and our nose, making a little dent. And all of our knowledge is lost.

So life, then, in the light of this *midrash*, is a process of remembering. As we journey between birth and death, we gather up tender strands of long forgotten wisdom. We rediscover knowledge we had lost long ago. We reveal buried truths stored away in the deep. And we find ourselves saying, "I knew it all along." Because we did.

This day of Rosh Hashanah is also called Yom HaZikaron, The Day of Remembrance. On Rosh Hashanah remembering is a holy act. We remember the existential truths into which we are born. We remember who we are meant to be. And we remember who we are as a part of the Jewish people.

Before we are born, in the womb, all of our needs are instantly met. We don't yet know desire, for nothing is missing. So life, then, is a journey of recovering loss. Of reclaiming all that gives us comfort, protection, and wholeness. We journey to find love and a sense of belonging. When we find it, it feels like recapturing something we forgot. It feels like coming home. We may still be lost, but we are lost together.

The biblical Ruth left her home and everything she knew. But she found a sense of belonging with Naomi. No matter where they journeyed, she was home because she had found her tribe. Home is the place where we feel a sense of profound connection. And when we find that place that we just know as "home," we feel as if we are in a holy place. The rabbis had a name for God – HaMakom, the place.

For some of us, this may feel like a leap of the imagination. Does God really dwell in the place we call home? Our forefather Jacob claimed, "God was in this place, and I – I did not know."

Do we think that if we cannot explain God, God is not real? Have you seen the wind? I mean really seen it, not just its effects. No one has to teach us to appreciate beauty. No one has to tell us how to wonder at grandeur. No one has to tell us that the touch from the right person is comforting.

Each and every one of us has a holy spark within, we only need to remember that it is there. That we hold a kind of holy knowledge we may have forgotten. Rosh Hashanah invites us to reignite this forgotten knowledge. It also invites us to remember who we are and who we want to be.

Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world: the day we renew ourselves, our souls.

A Chassidic teaching: Imagine you're looking at a candle. What you are really seeing is a mere lump of wax with a thread down its middle. When do the thread and wax become a candle? When do they fulfill the purpose for which they were created? Only when you put a flame to the thread does the candle become a candle.

On Rosh Hashanah, we begin to remember who we are meant to be in light of who we have been this past year. Have our actions reflected our deepest values? Have we been guided by kindness, compassion, generosity, and love? Today we recognize the gift of starting over again.

During my first week in seminary in Jerusalem, my entire class was walking to the Western Wall. As we approached the Old City, the streets got narrower. Our feet walked on the ancient, uneven stones, and, all of a sudden, I felt a strong pull in my core, almost as if I was being tugged by strings leading towards the Wall. I picked up my pace and before I realized it, I was running. I looked beside me and my friend was running, too. She said, "I feel.." and I responded, "I know," as tears streamed down our faces.

We were tapping into an ancient knowledge we never knew we had. A kind of generational Jewish memory long forgotten. And yet, there it was – pulling us forward to reclaim our heritage.

We see that the act of remembering is not static nor is it passive. We are instead challenged to be active remember-ers. The past and present are in dialogue with one another and this is the ingenuity of Torah.

On the one hand, Torah is a collective memory bank of our people; on the other, it is a regenerative guide for living that holds new meanings for each new generation.

Encountering Torah is like coming home. As we study it, we tie ourselves to the history and stories of our forefathers and foremothers, of Moses and the Israelites. While we do not literally "remember" walking through the dry seabed with giant waves parted on either side of us as we made our way to freedom, when we tell this story again and again, an ancient spark is lit. We at once remember and become members of this emerging, ongoing story of the Jewish people. The sound of our plaintive prayers and Hebrew words tug on something deep within us.

The Torah is called the tree of life, for its roots stand in the ancient deep while its branches grow and bear new fruit. It is always regenerating and offers us a language for renewal.

This is what it means to do *teshuva*, to return.

On this day of judgement, we are taught to pursue three acts of repair: *teshuva* (return), *tefilah* (prayer) and *tzedakah* (acts of justice).

So first, *teshuvah*: Throughout our lives, we confront similar situations that tempt us to transgress again and again: We are tempted to shame a colleague through gossip, we would like to blame someone else for our mistakes, we would prefer to ignore the needy person asking for help.

Torah teaches us to make better choices. To do the right thing.

In the book of Genesis, we learn about Joseph and his brothers. In a fit of anger and jealousy, Joseph's brothers throw him into a pit and sell him into slavery (there's a long backstory there). Years later, Joseph's brothers are presented with a similar scenario: while they could save themselves by abandoning the youngest brother, Benjamin, they make a different choice. This time, Judah offers himself up instead. Judah's act is the prototype for *teshuvah*, return. The Hebrew for Judah is Yehudah, and the Hebrew for Jews is *yehudim*. And we, too, are called to do *teshuvah*, to repent for our wrongdoings and return.

Second, *tefilah* (prayer): The biblical Hannah prays. She desperately wants to have a baby, and she is filled with anguish. She prays to God, her lips moving quickly as she pours out her suffering. Whether or not she has a baby is not really the point here. Rather, Hannah shows us that we can reach out in our need. Prayer is the deepest expression of our yearning and our gratitude. Whether we call God, "God," or experience a feeling of being channeled in or held, there is a greater energy than us, if we only allow ourselves to be open to it.

Third, *tzedakah* (acts of justice): The biblical Rebecca is willing – without question – to draw by hand enough water for a lowly servant and his 10 camels. Rebecca taps into a sense of compassion, and responds with generosity. This is a foundational story of what it means to be a Jew. We must not allow our compassion to ever diminish. Essentially, we are each other's help and guardians. All of us are intimately connected as we share the journey of what it is to be human. How could one of us ignore another in need?

On Rosh Hashanah we are judged – but repentance, prayer and acts of justice will temper God's decree. On this day, as we remember who we are, individually and collectively, we also ask God to remember us. We are all creations of God and as such, we exist within the same existential circumstances as all life. All that lives must die. Plants sprout, have their moments of beauty, before fading into the soil. We only have the moments in between birth and death. The best we can do is to strive to bring holiness into this dance of life through the choices we make and the actions we take. To take these High Holy Days to remember who we once were and who we want to be.

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Another *midrash* extends this story further, telling us about the existence of a tree of souls in Gan Eden, the Garden of Eden. It says every soul that has ever been born or will be born grows like a fruit on the tree. One angel gathers the ripe fruit and passes it to the world below, where another angel stays with the embryo until it is ready to be born, sharing all the knowledge that ever was and ever will be with this budding new life.

And when the baby is born with the sweet dip on the top of his lip, we know that at one time, he knew it all. We gather him up as he emerges from the womb, shrieking for all he has lost – and we nurture him with knowledge at once both ancient and new to him. He feels himself held in the arms of a loving parent as he begins the journey of life. Along the way, he will recapture what he once knew, remembering the ancient call towards home.

Shanah tova.