

I recall an incident I experienced with a relative (an aunt by marriage, to be precise), who was an intelligent and successful businesswoman with a blunt, straightforward and no-nonsense personality. We had discovered in the course of conversation with a member of the Springfield Jewish community that he had been in the same kind of business as our aunt and that he recalled quite well having known her many years ago when their paths had crossed. When we reported the conversation to our aunt, however, her reply was characteristically brusque: “I really don’t have any time for trips down memory lane.” In retrospect, I understand where she was coming from. She was over ninety at the time and would have wanted at that age to get the most out of the present rather than focusing on the past, although, truth be told, she more than likely had the same attitude during the earlier stages of her life.

I, by contrast, tend to be quite emotional about my memories of the past and find myself often thinking and talking about times gone by. I have in our basement what Nancy and I refer to as memory boxes – five small or medium cartons from the U-Haul store filled with photographs, albums, papers, souvenirs and chochkies that I know I will eventually have to dispose of. What my son or extended family members don’t want will have to be pitched. Being one of the older cousins on my mother’s side of the family, I have had the status of unofficial historian and am happy to be consulted by my younger cousins to clarify a point of family history. I was recently interviewed as part of an oral history project that is being conducted by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and very much enjoyed the opportunity it afforded to reflect upon and talk about my past. When I am in the company of a congregant who is a life-long member of Temple Israel or whose affiliation goes back to the early years of my rabbinate or even before that, much of the conversation seems to focus on the past – things that happened decades ago or people who were part of the community way back when and have since either passed on or moved away from Springfield. Reminiscing establishes a close bond between us. If, however, there are people present who are more recent arrivals to the community, I do sometimes feel that I am being rude and shutting them out of the conversation.

Judaism is a religion of balance. We strive to balance our loyalty to the *mitzvot* of the Torah and their external observance with inward devotion and an appreciation of the spirit of the law. We try to balance our activism in behalf of our people, *am Yisrael*, and our concern for its welfare with a universalistic outlook that acknowledges that people of all races and creeds are

equally God's children and recipients of Divine blessing and grace. And we understand the process of repentance and atonement that are the themes of this holiday season to involve a balance between our turning back to God and away from sin and God's willingness to forgive us and to grant us the possibility of a new beginning. With the dimensions of time, as well, we need to keep our focus on past, present and future and their claims upon us in proper balance.

All three dimensions play a role in Jewish lore and tradition. When the *shofar* was sounded on Rosh Hashanah we had occasion to reflect on its various meanings, which relate to past **and** present **and** future. The *shofar* recalls one of the most significant events of the Jewish past, the giving of Torah at Sinai, which was accompanied by thunder, lightning and the sound of the ram's horn. It was Sinai that fashioned our people into a nation consecrated to God's service and gave purpose to our collective existence. The *shofar* also calls to us in the present, admonishing us that **now** is the time to take stock of our lives, to break out of self-destructive patterns of behavior, and to affirm and practice the enduring and eternal values of our faith – humility, compassion and justice. And finally, the *shofar* speaks to our aspirations for the future, for a Messianic age of universal peace and justice, which will be heralded by the sounding of the ram's horn.

The past plays an important role within Judaism. Our collective past, our shared history, creates a bond of solidarity that unites Jews worldwide. Collective memory shapes the values we profess and by which we strive to live. The memory of slavery in Egypt, preserved through the celebration of the Passover *seder*, teaches us empathy with the stranger – the vulnerable and the marginalized – an appreciation for the blessings of freedom and a hatred for oppression and injustice. Remembering Sinai carries with it a lesson, that freedom must be circumscribed within a framework of law and must never be allowed to degenerate into license and anarchy. When we remember our post-Biblical history, there are valuable lessons as well about the resilience, the optimism and the creativity that enabled our people to survive dispersion, exile and persecution. On a personal level too, we owe a debt to our past – to our parents, our teachers and our mentors who influenced us and enabled us to become who we are and to the scientists, scholars and artists who expanded the frontiers of knowledge and bequeathed to us a cultural legacy which nourishes our spirits. To think of ourselves as existing only within the present tense and to neglect acknowledging this debt is the height of ingratitude.

But too great a focus on the past can have its downside. For those of us who, like me, enjoy traveling down memory lane, it can be a distraction from the challenges of the present moment and from the joy and fulfillment that can be found in fully experiencing the present. Seeking to hold on to what has been handed down from the past in all of its particulars can imprison us in behaviors, customs and social arrangements that are no longer productive or suitable to the circumstances and conditions of our personal or communal life. One of the lessons my mother taught me is that life moves forward not backward. During this holiday season we need, to let go of resentments, grudges and bitterness over things that transpired in the past. Whether justified or not, such negative feelings have a toxic effect on our sense of well-being and keep us from moving forward with our lives. Feelings of guilt as well are a way that we are held captive to the past. Of course, we should feel bad about treating others shabbily, abusing or exploiting others, betraying those who trusted us or failing to live up to our responsibilities within our families and our communities. There are acts of commission and of omission for which we should feel remorse, which is well and good when it moves us to seek reconciliation and atonement and to change our ways. Judaism offers us this annual season of atonement so that we can make up for past wrongdoing and relieve ourselves of the burden of guilt. But excessive wallowing in guilt serves no purpose, only miring us in the past and deepening our despair.

In our daily, Shabbat and holiday liturgy we celebrate God's redemptive acts in the past, but we believe that the complete and final redemption of humankind will take place in the future. It is for that future time when the human potential for living in peace, harmony and security and with justice for all will be realized that we hope and pray. This is the future that the great prophets of Israel – Micah and Isaiah - envisioned, and it is what is meant when we speak of *tikkun olam*, perfecting the world under the rule of the Almighty. It is incumbent on us to recognize that humankind's present circumstances, in which hatred and conflict, cruelty, injustice and oppression, poverty, disease and deprivation abound, fall far short of the ideal and are not to be accepted with complacency and resignation, as the way things will always be. Our tradition provides us with a vision of future redemption, and encourages, indeed commands us to work to make it a reality, and to never lose hope that these dreams and aspirations can come true.

As with the past, however, focusing on the future has its downside and can distract us from the tasks and responsibilities of the present. We can lose ourselves in dreaming about how wonderful our future is going to be and fail to appreciate the blessings that are within our reach right now. And if our vision of humanity's future redemption is not coupled with an understanding of our obligation to work as partners with God to bring it about, it may lead us to passivity. But the primary danger, I believe, in fixating on the future is the worry and anxiety we feel about what may lie ahead. I know this first hand, because I am a virtuoso in the art of anxiety and worry, always thinking of "what ifs" and concocting scenarios of the future that are bound to cause me distress. This has been an unfortunate habit I've had since my childhood which my father tried to wean me away from by telling me that half the things people worry about will never happen and the other half will happen anyway, whether we worry about them or not. Everyone worries, of course, and everyone has some degree of anxiety; that's quite normal, but for some it can be excessive and even crippling. The antidote to anxiety prescribed by Jewish tradition is faith. There's so much in our life that we cannot control, and there are going to be things that are going to happen to us that will cause suffering, adversity and loss. Faith does not mean that it's all going to turn out well for us in the end (because it doesn't always end up well), nor does it mean that because we're believers or do *mitzvot* or because we're good people, God will shield us from harm (as Rabbi Kushner taught us, bad things do happen to good people). To the extent that foresight and planning can prevent or mitigate the things that we fear, all well and good. Beyond that is where we enter the realm of faith and find strength in believing that we have the inner resources to cope with adversity and that even in the direst of circumstances our life can still have meaning. Much easier said than done, unfortunately! But it is what our tradition means when it speaks of *emunah* (faith) and *bitachon* (trust), and it is a frame of mind toward which we can strive.

All of which leads me to what I regard as the most important of the dimensions of time – the present. In our prayer book there is a reading that states that the past is irrevocably gone and the future has not yet been born, so that all we really have is the present moment. To indulge in a bit of punning, I challenge you and I challenge myself to be truly present in the present. Maybe that is why we recite a *b'racha* when we enjoy a meal or a snack - so that we can eat mindfully, so that we can truly savor our food and, so that we can be aware of and grateful for the miracle of nourishment and sustenance. Take time to appreciate the beauty of our natural surroundings.

When you're at synagogue, don't be what Dr. Heschel referred to as a spiritual absentee. Even if you can't follow the Hebrew or the theology of the *siddur* doesn't resonate with you, use the opportunity to experience a sense of gratitude for life itself and to reflect on how you might be a more loving and compassionate person. When you're with others, be present to them, attentive to what they're saying and sometimes to what they're not saying but what can be intuited from their words and their expressions. When others you know are suffering, be there to comfort them and to alleviate their distress. And where there is injustice, be a voice for the oppressed.

Go down memory lane, if you will, but don't travel there to find an escape from the tasks of the present. When you visit the past, let it not be with bitterness, regret or guilt but rather as a source of inspiration and instruction and of connection with dear ones whose love was a joy and delight to us. Think, if you will, of the future but let it not be an idle dream. Know that you must work hard to translate hope into reality. And when you think of what lies ahead, do so with faith and with trust. Above all, be attentive to the present. During Rosh Hashanah, the choir led us in two lively songs, both of which contained the word *ha-yom*, today. It is today, in the present, the here and now, that we stand in judgment, *ha-yom ya'amid bamishpat*, and it is today, if we are responsive to the call to act with justice and compassion and to walk humbly with our Creator, that we will find strength and blessing. *Ha-yom t'amtzenu, ha-yom t'var-chenu*.