

For a not-insignificant period of my life my favorite movie was the film version of the musical, "Gigi." Maybe some of you remember the production that I now realize as an adult is a troubling story about a deeply troubling family but that part is a sermon for another day. For this morning, the movie offers a charming song between two former lovers in which they recall their first date.

We met at nine. We met at eight.
I was on time. No, you were late.
Ah yes, I remember it well!

We dined with friends. We dined alone.
A tenor sang. A baritone.
Ah, yes, I remember it well...

The carriage ride... You walked me home.
You lost a glove. It was a comb.
Ah yes, I remember it well.

The brilliant sky. We had some rain
Those Russian songs... From sunny Spain!
Ah yes, I remember it well!

As a younger person, I assumed that the man, who seems to have every detail wrong, was the forgetful one. Now, as an adult, I realize that either of them could be completely right or completely wrong, or, generously, we could assume that they each remember 50% correctly and the truth of the details lie somewhere in between. What the song reminds us is that memory is a tricky and elusive thing. It can be accurate. It can be powerful. It can be misleading and misrepresentative. Just two days ago in Torah study we contemplated together how much better some things were 100 years ago. Then we considered what life was like 100 years ago for Americans of African heritage and women and accepted that our "memories of the past", while accurate in some ways, can also be romanticizations that are incomplete.

Memory is one of the central tenets of Jewish life. Remembrance is kind of our thing. It's our signature move. The Baal Shem Tov, who founded Chasidism, famously observed, "In remembrance is the secret of redemption." Historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi notes in his book titled "Zachor" (which means "remember") that the commandment to remember is given no less than 169 times in the Torah. That's a lot of remembering. As Yerushalmi observes, memory plays a central role in Jewish life. It shapes our future by cultivating narratives of truth out of our past. We do this in our personal lives as well. We reflect on our experiences, we build and affirm a narrative. We highlight, through story, ritual, and force of will, the events and moments we have experienced that reinforce our narrative and our understanding of the world. The

problem, of course, is that no narrative is complete and narratives can only tell us how we understood things in the past. If, as adults, and as a people, we never take the time to challenge our narratives, we might be basing our future on a story with which we fundamentally disagree. We might be shaping who we are today and who we want to become tomorrow based on a selective understanding of our past and its meaning. Stories and narratives can be beautiful and they can be powerful but they can also be wily and deceptive. Reflecting on memory and the act of remembrance we realize, that if we want to be ethical people and grow into our best selves, we need to begin that journey by re-evaluating our history, our memories, and the narratives that we constructed years ago.

This is not to say that I'm telling us in 5780 that the things we remember from the past are wrong. This song from Gigi, reminiscing a happy time, offers the reality that people can go through the same experiences together and have very different memories and feelings about it. What one person remembers as a lovely conversation, another person may experience as bullying. What one person remembers as an absentee parent, a parent may remember as a great deal of sacrifice to care for said child. What one person remembers as a fun date, another person may remember as assault. Brain research scientist and traumatic memory expert, Dr. Jim Hopper, observes that the act of forming memories is actually a chaotic process for the brain as it works to sequence together a series of events. The process of creating memory is a rapid act of both preservation and creation that happens simultaneously. The more traumatic an event, the more likely it is that the trauma will be remembered while surrounding details become uncertain, unclear and fuzzy. For traumatic events, they stand out pronouncedly in the mind while the events around them fade, sometimes even immediately. This is why sexual assault victims can often remember profound details about their assault but the events leading up to and immediately following are often difficult for victims to recall. This forgetfulness of surrounding details doesn't make someone an inaccurate witness to their own experience- it is a sign of the depth of the trauma. The brain has exerted all its energy to preserve the trauma experience in order to process it in a very intentional way. The same is true for survivors of terror attacks, sudden violence, and soldiers on the battle field. These individuals can often remember the smallest and most painstaking details of the trauma event itself but may in fact have trouble recalling significant context - context that, for those of us who are outside the event, seems impossible to NOT remember. Dr. Hopper, who teaches psychology at Harvard in addition to his private research, underscores that forgetting surrounding details is a common feature of trauma memory.

As our brains work to preserve, order, categorize, and create the memories, they go through a rapid process of inclusion and exclusion. Later, when we reflect on the memories, we review the information we have preserved and build a narrative to create a sequence, meaning, and story. As time goes by, we focus on memories of our experiences which reinforce our understanding of the events at hand and the significance of the memory itself. As time goes by, our narratives reinforce which

memories we preserve, highlight and refine while our memories, through this process, reinforce the narratives we have created that provide us with context and meaning.

The question we have is, when does reinforcing our narrative serve an ethical purpose and when does it keep us moored in sentiments that are not healthy, not accurate, or not ethical?

On a basic level we all understand this question and this concept. Our narratives don't just help us understand the past, they help us build our future. Our narratives and our memories help us order and organize our orientation to the world. Then, when we settle in to a narrative, our brain offers up memories that reinforce our sense of truth. If we want to tell ourself a story about how other people are forever excluding us, we can recall each and every intentional and unintentional slight. We can remember everything that we were left out of. We can dwell on which parties we didn't get invited to and which events posted on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat from which we were excluded. Our brain helps us along, ever the willing servant, to offer up outsized emphasis of the moments of exclusion rather than to the many other instances of being included, being in the pictures, and being present with people who love us. If we have any hope of repairing damaged relationships or living with less hurt in our hearts, the path to repair and wellness has to begin with a willingness to examine our narratives and consider what evidence to the contrary we've ignored or shut out. Only when we reconsider what parts of the story we might be missing can we hope to come to find a deeper truth and some measure of release from some of our pain.

As it goes for us as individuals, so too is this true for us as a Jewish community. Jewish history is filled with terrible moments of persecution, exile, destruction, and displacement. We emphasize these parts of our story because they reinforce our narrative of a small and much castigated people who, for two and a half millennia have been subject to the whims of capricious, uncaring rulers. All of this is true and it helps us understand who we were and who we think we should become. But there are other parts to our story as well. There have, in fact, been tremendous periods of safety and stability. There have been periods where we have had autonomy, dignity, independence, and power. There have been long stretches where we thrived in an atmosphere of stability and mutuality. But for too many of our people these moments take a back seat to the narrative of oppression. As a rabbi, I am comfortable with the narrative of oppression. It reminds us we are a humble people. It gives us our imperative to identify with the slave, the downtrodden and the marginalized. It is no accident that it was a young Jewish woman who penned the beautiful poem at the base of the Statue of Liberty speaking with first-hand identification about the homeless, tempest tossed washing up on the shore of America. This narrative compels us to speak out on behalf of those who are compromised by the forces of power in our society and demands that we cannot be silent in the face of injustice. Our history that we have chosen to emphasize helps us understand who we were and who we know we should strive to become. The challenge is to remember. It is to remember and understand the other parts of our history; to hear their messages as well and to realize it may be a moral imperative to challenge the totality of our narratives.

In our modern world, as Jews, we still largely see ourselves through the lens of the downtrodden. For too many in our broader Jewish world this narrative is used as an allowance to justify short-cuts, to excuse prejudice, and to nullify our obligations to others. I have, myself, heard people say, in a synagogue, here in San Diego that they question their obligation to be concerned about refugees because no one cared about their grandparents when they were refugees. I have heard people say that Jews cannot be oppressors because we ourselves are a minority. I have witnessed people making excuses for Jews in positions of power shirking along the edges of legality and morality because we're a small and historically oppressed people as though historical oppression is somehow a license to unethical and immoral conduct. I worry deeply that for too many in our community, our narrative of the receiving end of history's abuse has hardened our own hearts as Pharaoh's once was; that it has made us so relieved to finally be in positions of power and authority, that we make excuses for modern day Pharaoh's. We pretend we are not communally responsible for one another. 36 times God asks us to remember our history, not so that we could save only ourselves, but so that we could remember that it is OUR OBLIGATION as Jews to remember, and then to protect the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Our memories are supposed to motivate us towards a moral imperative of care, concern, and inclusion.

Join me for a few moments as we walk down Jewish History Lane. 2500 years ago, long after leaving Egypt, long after returning to the land of our ancestors and building our Temple in Jerusalem and our nation of Israel, our indigenous home and Temple were destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylonia. Our nobility and priesthood were exiled to Bavel. Two generations later, after defeating the Babylonians, Persian emperor, Cyrus the Great, allowed our leadership to return home and rebuild our Temple in Jerusalem. Upon arrival, Ezra the priest found that the Jews who had been left behind were not living their Judaism in a way of which he approved. He decreed that all men who had married non-Israelite women were to divorce their wives and disown their children or face excommunication. At what should have been a glorious chapter in our people's history, a different story was written; a story of degradation, humiliation, division and destruction. God's second house was built on the backs of destroyed families, segregated communities, and religious intolerance. It is no wonder this house fell too. It was built on a rotten foundation of zealotry, exclusion, and fanaticism.

Several centuries later, a civil war was fought and won by the Maccabees against the Greek-Selucid empire and assimilation. In celebration we commemorate Chanukah and eat fried carbohydrates - the highest form of jubilation that exists. But the reign of the Maccabees was so disastrous for the Jewish people, their books were omitted from the canon of Jewish sacred text. Opposed to any level of assimilation and determined to position themselves as the only authentic dynasty of High Priesthood, they ushered in an era of zealotry and fanaticism. The descendants of Judah Maccabee themselves wound up in a civil war with each other fighting for control of the High Priesthood. Their conflict led to the Roman occupation, the two rebellions against

Rome, the total destruction of Jerusalem's second temple and our 2,000 year exile from our homeland.

These memories, these histories are important to understand the totality of Jewish history. However, they are moments that run counter to our narrative of being the little guy who survives the big guy and does it while maintaining moral purity. So why reflect on these collective memories today? Just as the Maccabees were the ideological descendants of Ezra, their own ideological descendants are still with us today and until we can face them, we can never overcome them. This is at the heart of the mitzvah of remembrance.

Just over one year ago, Isaac "Bougie" Herzog, former Labor Party and Opposition Leader was announced as the new director for the Jewish Agency. Commenting on his new role Herzog stated that inter-marriage in the Jewish community is a magefah - a plague - on the Jewish people. Over the course of the last year, he has been dealing with the ramifications of his statement. Last summer, when I met Mr. Herzog, I was able to share my response to his devastating words. I invited him to come to San Diego; to sit with us in our synagogue here at Temple Emanu-El. I invited him to see what a Jewish community looks like that embraces diversity, celebrates our blended families, and works together to create a vibrant Jewish world made up of dedicated Jews and non-Jewish family who all work together every day to ensure a next Jewish generation. I insisted that he come see our Price Family Preschool, our Torah School, our Community Jewish High, our Madrichim, our parents, our grandparents, and our community friends so that he could see the vibrancy, health, vitality, and authenticity of our beautiful and diverse community. I actually dared him to come and speak his words here on our bimah, to our community so that he could face his bias head-on, so that he could decide to not be Ezra, so that he could hopefully see his error and maybe even apologize. I'm still waiting for him to accept. His words reflect our historical narrative and its resulting mindset of fear. I get it. I understand. We have a narrative. We are a tiny people whose very existence is constantly threatened. Every generation of Jews worries that it will be the last. Today I challenge this narrative and his words.

Our interfaith families are not a plague - they are a blessing! Our children of our interfaith families are a blessing! Our non-Jewish spouses, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins who come to our Bar and Bat Mitzvahs and stand with us under our chuppas, and share in our joy and nachas as our children read Torah, and find their own marital partners - they are a blessing. They represent the joining of Jewish and secular destiny, a shared understanding that we are all God's children and we are all family, and we are all worthy of living with dignity and equality. To say that a family with a non-Jewish parent or blended traditions is a decimation of Judaism is to deny a huge aspect of Jewish history and culture. We have always wound up intermarrying. It's why we look like the local people in most every place we have lived and settled. Maybe Jewish safety will finally come when our destiny is tied to the destiny of the people of the world, not because they feel guilty for treating us badly for 2500 years, but because they love us because we ARE their family and they are ours. To

have more people love us because they have joined their lives to us - this is a blessing. And to have people who allow us the gift of raising their children in our tradition as Jews - this is NOT a plague. It is a blessing! Ezra tried radical separation. He used his power to shame families and to separate spouses and parents from children. He used his authority to say who we can and should love. And what did he build? He built a second temple filled with zealotry and fanaticism - a second temple that enormously emphasized the correctness of some Jews over other Jews, that created a hierarchy of Jewish authenticity and worthiness and this fomented for several hundred years until his ideological inheritors invited in the Romans and helped bring about our own destruction, exile, and enslavement. And what have we learned since then? Have we been teaching our children the narrative of the dangers of fundamentalism? Have we been teaching our children and ourselves the dangers of those in power declaring who is and who is not a good enough Jew and what is and what is not a good enough Jewish family? We cannot let ourselves forget this narrative of Ezra and the Maccabees. We must remember the other side of the story.

Please understand. I don't celebrate assimilation. I don't want our children or our adults wandering away from their Judaism and the precious legacy of our Jewish heritage, morals, traditions, values, and ethics. I am a rabbi because I believe in the enduring worthiness of our Jewish voice and perspective. But I also challenge that it's wrong to assume that interfaith families are the cause of assimilation or a threat to Jewish survival and wellness. I know many friends from my childhood who went to synagogue regularly, who were raised in a household with two Jewish parents, and who today are not living Jewish lives or raising Jewish children. I know nearly everyone sitting in this room knows similar families. At the same time, I know that our school is FILLED with interfaith families who are raising smart, active, involved, dedicated, and wonderfully chutzpadik Jewish kids. Some of them are in the sanctuary today. Some of them are downstairs helping run children's programming. Some of them are at school because they're terrified of falling behind in a class or an assignment. Some of them are on two-hour bathroom breaks wandering the grounds and hiding out with their friends somewhere on this campus just like I did in synagogue on the high holy days and who knows... they too might end up as rabbis or synagogue presidents. It is time to challenge our narrative.

If we have any hope of making 5780 a year of blessing and goodness, we have got to be willing to challenge the perceived perfection of our memories and our narratives. We have to be willing to look at our challenged relationships and ask if there is a different way to understand our history. And if we are going to be able to make meaningful change, both in ourselves, and our world, then we have to be willing to look at all of our history and all of its moments to expand the narratives. We can choose to be blind to the effects of our choices when in power, or, like we do with Torah and most of the rest of Jewish history, we can look at the difficult moments and the inelegant stories and learn from them. Our children need to hear these stories too. I hope all of our children get a world class education so they can become brilliant chemists, doctors, astrophysicists, musicians, artists, playwrights, baristas, farmers,

soccer stars, stock brokers, CEO's, non-profit Executive Directors, teachers, rabbis, dancers, bankers, or landscape architects! But I also hope that they'll keep attending CJH, and youth group, and life at synagogue so that we can teach them our whole story; so that we can teach them not just to be brilliant, successful, and visionary, but so we can also teach them to be kind, to be inclusive, and to be the kind of people who consider the ramifications of their actions and their words on subsequent generations. For decades, the meaning of the Baal Shem Tov's words eluded me. How can remembrance be the source of our redemption? The answer is that when we remember the full picture, we rescue the rest of the narrative that might have been lost and we hear the voice of Jewish experience and history that begs us to challenge an overly self-supportive narrative. Remembrance allows us to wrestle with our messy histories, challenge our narratives of comfort, and learn from our past mistakes. It's only when we're willing to really look at how we remember and what our narratives mean that we can hope to unattached from excuses for a-morality and instead hold ourselves and our community accountable. Brilliance without compassion can lead to cruelty. Power without humility can lead to devastation. Unchallenged narrative, without correction and consideration, can lead to destruction. May we be inspired in this new year of 5780 to embrace the challenge of changing the story, of hearing other narratives so that we can guide ourselves and our children with a broader and deeper moral perspective than ever before. And in doing so, may our remembrance bring us redemption.