

# The Secret of Memory

Category: Holidays, Rosh Hashana

*Memory has been proven to be quite fallible. How are we to remember things that are important?*

## Do You Really Remember?

Good Yom Tov!

Where were you on September 11, 2001?

Well, it's that time of year again when we mark the anniversary of the Twin Towers attack—a moment that every American citizen remembers, not just for what happened but more so, where they were when they first heard about it. In psychology, it's called flashbulb memory: having a strong memory of learning about a shocking event, but not of the shocking event.

But do we really remember exactly where we were?

On September 12, 2001, just one day after the Twin Towers collapsed, university researchers asked 54 students to answer the question, "Where were you when you heard the news?"

Six weeks later, they asked those same students the same question: Where were you during those awful moments? And 32 weeks later, they again wrote down their recollections.

The researchers found that in the course of 32 weeks, some 40 percent of the details had changed from the initial responses. But when the students were asked whether they remembered everything clearly, they responded that they were sure that they remembered every detail of that traumatic day.

Not only that, but in other research, three researchers from New York, Michigan and California did joint research one week after September 11, 2001, interviewing 3,000 people across seven U.S. cities. And like the first set of researchers, they asked them the same question: "Where were you on September 11?"

Well, one year later, this second group of researchers came back to the same 3,000 interviewees and asked them to describe where they had been on that day. They did the same thing three years later. And again, the same result popped up—only 60 percent of the recollections and descriptions were the same as those they recalled a week after the attacks.

With some of them, the researchers showed them what they had written a week after the event, and they would basically respond with, “Yes, I admit that that’s my handwriting—but I don’t know why I wrote that because it’s 100-percent clear to me that it happened exactly the way I remember it today.”

It’s clear that the respondents were not lying, of course—but the study teaches us something about human recollection. Experts explain that memory is a deceptive machine—a person could witness several events separately, but the memory can glue them all together into one recalled event. In other words, something you saw in the news can seem to you as if you saw it yourself, and a conversation that you had last week can later seem as if you just had it.

Brian Williams, the famous former national anchorman for NBC Nightly News, had covered the Iraq War in 2003. While he was there, he was riding in a U.S. Army Chinook helicopter that was flying over a hotspot, providing real-time journalistic coverage. There were several helicopters in his group, and several more in a group that was 30 minutes ahead of them.

The helicopters ahead of them, which were carrying U.S. Marines, suddenly took fire from RPGs and Kalashnikovs. One of those helicopters had to make a crash-landing as a result.

Meanwhile, Mr. Williams’ helicopter also had to make an emergency landing—but as a result of a sandstorm, not enemy fire.

Over the next several years, Williams recounted the story on television several times exactly as it had happened. However, with time, he slowly started changing the details a bit—to the point that it turned into a story in which he was in the helicopter hit by a rocket.

During the NBC Nightly News broadcast of January 30, 2015, Brian Williams stated that a military helicopter he was traveling in had been forced down after being hit by an RPG.

Soon after it aired, his story was criticized by several of the service members who had actually been on board one of those three Chinook helicopters that had been attacked. They revealed the truth that he had actually not been on any of those choppers, and in one fell sweep, the facts came to light.

On February 4, 2015, just a few days later, Brian Williams, caught in an apparent blatant lie, apologized live on TV, also recanting his story. But it was to no avail. It seemed that everyone was angry at him. And on February 10, he was suspended without pay for six months—and demoted to breaking news anchor over at MSNBC that following June. His formerly award winning career was over.

It seems like a pretty clear-cut case of lying. But did Brian Williams really intend to not tell the truth? Based on what we know from the 9/11 researchers, not necessarily—it very well could have been that over the years, his brain convinced him that he had in fact been on the one helicopter that got shot down.

And that brings us to today: Rosh Hashanah.

## **Rosh Hashana's Real Name**

Now, “Rosh Hashanah” is the name that everyone knows. But in our prayer books, you’ll see that it’s not called Rosh Hashanah but rather, Yom Hazikaron—the Day of Remembrance. In fact, when we light the candles for the Rosh Hashanah holiday, the blessing that we recite states, “Yom HaZikaron,” and when we make the holiday Kiddush, we refer to the holiday as “Yom HaZikaron”—with both of those instances invoking the verse (Vayikra 23:24), “In the seventh month, on the first of the month, it shall be a Shabbos for you, a remembrance of [Israel through] the shofar blast a holy occasion.”

So, today is the day on which we must concentrate on the subject of memory. In the Rosh Hashanah Amidah prayer, we say the following about G-d: “There is no forgetfulness before Your Throne of Glory.” True, G-d remembers everything—which means that we are to understand “Yom HaZikaron” not as a day on which G-d remembers but rather, an alarm clock of sorts for us to reinforce the things that we remember.

But now that we’ve just established that our own memories can deceive us, what are we supposed to do?

Now, the Torah instructs us (Devarim 16:3), “So that you shall remember the day you departed from the land of Egypt all the days of your life.”

The Sages recognized the limits of human memory and didn't try to hide from that fact. They knew that memory loss is a painfully touchy subject, and so they didn't rely on our memories to uphold our traditions but rather, established that we recount the story of the Exodus, the Splitting of the Red Sea and the Song of the Sea again and again. In fact, the entire reason for the inclusion of the section regarding tzitzis in the daily recital of the Shma is because “it was established to remember the Exodus from Egypt” (Shulchan Aruch, beginning of Laws of Krias Shma).

Furthermore, in the first section of the Shma, it states: “Vishinantam L'vanecha”—and you shall teach them to your sons. Now, that word vishinantam, “and you shall teach,” is related to the word sheenun, or repetition—meaning that it is incumbent upon us to review and study the Torah again and again. We read the entire Torah every year anew, even though we all know the stories. Why? Because we all know the stories because we read the entire Torah every year anew.

## **How To Remember**

So perhaps we can say that the solution to the mystery of memory is hidden right in our Rosh Hashanah prayers—in the Musaf prayers, in fact.

The Musaf Amidah is divided into three sections: Malchiyos, Zichronos and Shofros.

In the first one, it is described at length how G-d is the King of the entire universe, quoting ten verses from across Tanach that speak of G-d's dominion. We then petition G-d, “Rule over the entire universe in Your Glory!” and conclude with the blowing of the shofar.

We then proceed with the Zichronos prayers. In these, we petition G-d to remember us favorably on the Day of Judgment, also quoting ten verses that talk about how G-d remembers all of mankind in general and the Jewish Nation in particular. We then blow the shofar again and proceed with the third section, Shofros, in similar fashion.

The Zichronos section begins with the words, “You remember the creation of the universe... for there is no forgetfulness before Your Throne of Glory.” But then comes an expression that I think explains everything—we say, “And also Noah with love You remembered”—G-d loved Noah and therefore remembered him and took him out of the Ark.

And so, my friends, the secret of memory is love.

If there is someone we love, we will remember their birthdays, and everything else about them. No mother ever forgets what her child needs, and a parent never forgets what his or her child’s voice sounds like—a person can immediately identify if it’s his or her child crying.

To remember our Judaism, we need to love it—and the more we love it, the easier it will be for us to remember all the details. When that’s the case, not only will it not be a burden but on the contrary—it will be a pleasure.

Sports fans remember the names (and numbers) of all the players, and how many games they played throughout their careers, how many points they scored, and all their other stats. Nobody taught them all that stuff in school! It wasn’t on any test. But still, any serious fan remembers all those details. Why so? Because they live it. And it’s the same thing with Hollywood stars—the real fans know the history of each one of them—how many movies they acted in, the names of each one, their most famous roles, etc. Why? Because they love it.

And so, my friends, if we want our own children to remember Judaism, we must see to it that they love it—and if it’s fun, they certainly will!

As the Talmud (Tractate Avodah Zarah 19a) says, “A person should always study Torah in a place his heart desires, as the verse [Tehilim 1:2] states, ‘But his desire is in the law of the L-rd.’”

Now, the word “place,” makom in the original Hebrew here, has several meanings. It could mean the physical place that the person desires—the location at which he wishes to study Torah. It could also refer to the teachers that the person desires—the scholars from whom he wishes to study Torah. And more than all that, it could also refer to the subject that the person desires—the part(s) of Torah which he wishes to explore and probe. Why is this so? Because if “his heart desires,” if he loves what he is learning, and where he’s learning it, and the

people he's learning it from, then he will succeed in his studies. And as the Rebbe writes, "One should study 'in the place his heart desire' because then, even the power of pleasure will assist the power of memory" (Igros Kodesh, Vol. 8, pg. 302, et al).

## **Making Experiences**

Now, all of us want to create memories. We'll do things like taking the whole family on a cruise so as to create memories—or fly to Disney World to create memories.

But this is true with Judaism, too. We need to set before our eyes the target of "creating Jewish memories"—to forge Jewish experiences that our kid will remember forever. For example, so many of us still remember our grandparents' Seder table—for the simple reason that there was so much love and fun, when the entire family would get together and we'd all get presents, hugs and kisses.

It is incumbent upon us, my friends, to create experiences of bonding—whether it's a Friday night Shabbos meal with friends or any other Jewish subject, it needs to have lots of joy and fun.

And this is not true just for our children, but is also very helpful for us, too. Because when you remember that your visit to the synagogue was a pleasant experience, you'll miss it and you'll want to come back—and when you learn something Jewish and you enjoyed learning that thing, you'll open that book again.

After all, Noah was remembered... with love.

Good Yom Tov!