

A Heart that Remembers

How to engrave Judaism on the hearts and minds of our children.

This week, for yet another change, let's talk about memory.

As we all know, the more person ages, the more he or she experiences loss of memory.

A person can meet someone who greets him like an old friend, asking, "So, how are you!"—but the person thinks to himself, "Who's this person speaking to me? I remember meeting him once, but I can't remember what his name is!" So they end up having a long conversation—and after they part ways, the person says to the guy next to him, "Remind me what his name is..."

The following has also happened to all of us now and then: Somebody comes up to you and says, "Hey, Jerry! How ARE you? Wow, long time no see!" And you just look at him—and he looks back at you and says, "Oh, come on, Jerry! What—you don't remember me? We met a few years ago at that medical convention, you know, and we were talking about lawsuits involving MRIs... remember?" And you're embarrassed to admit that you have no recollection of who he is or what he's talking about. And then you start with the silly excuses: "Sorry, I must be getting old..."

If memory is important for people, then memory is a subject

that is all the more important in Judaism. We might even say that remembering is actually the most important subject to the Jewish Nation.

Now, why would that be?

In another week, we'll be celebrating the holiday of the Giving of the Torah, when the Jewish Nation received the Written Torah and on top of that, the "Oral Torah"—the part of the Torah that was forbidden to write down but rather, which had to be committed to memory. And at the Giving of the Torah, every Jew from young to old was recruited for that sacred mission.

But how indeed do we do that? What are the methods and techniques of not forgetting the Torah? If you forget a friend's name, chances are that someone can remind you. But about "one who forgets one word of his studying," the Mishna (Ethics of the Fathers) has some strong things to say. So let's review some of them.

Repetition

In the Recitation of the Shma that we say every day, the Torah commands us to teach the Torah to our children. But the phrase that the Torah uses is not vilimadeta, "and you shall teach" but rather, vishinantom. While that also means "and you shall teach," the root word of vishinantom is shanein, which means both "repeat" and "sharpen." It refers to something you repeat again and again. So why does the Torah use this phrase? Because in order to remember the Torah, every father needs to "sharpen" it and repeat it to his children again and again.

The Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 99a) tells us that “one who studies but doesn’t review is like one who sows but doesn’t reap.” That means that without repetition, all the person’s studying was in vain and that ultimately, he will forget everything. (Just ask anyone who went to medical school.)

Now, there were Talmudic Sages who had various personal customs when it came to study repetition. For example (Tractate Brachos 38b), Rabbi Chiya would review his studies every 30 days. There were other Sages who would even review everything new that they learned 40 times! And Hillel the Elder, one of the most famous Sages, said (Tractate Chagigah 9b), “Who can be called a ‘servant of G-d’? One who repeats his studies 101 times.”

Quoting Your Master

Hillel himself launched a new technique on how to remember the Torah he had studied: He would review the thing he heard from his master in the exact way his master had said them. Now, Hillel was a disciple of Shmaya and Avtalyon, who were the two leaders of the Jewish Nation in that era. But what is most interesting about them is that they were both converts to Judaism.

Because they did not have a Jewish background, they weren’t brought up with the natural pronunciation of the Hebrew letter Hey. Instead, they would say Aleph. It’s sort of like someone today who didn’t grow up going to Jewish school and doesn’t quite know how to pronounce the letter Ches and says Hey instead—so he says “Hallah,” not “Challah.”

So when Hillel would review a law in his master's name, he would "impersonate" his master and express the words the wrong way, only because that's how his master had said them. Why? Because, as the Talmud also says (Tractate Eduyos 1:3), "one must quote his master verbatim"—and when you mimic your master and say what he said exactly as he said them, then you won't forget them.

And so Chasidim throughout the generations had the custom of imitating their masters, whether in manner of speech, dress, or even handwriting, gait and so on. For example, Chabad Chasidim don't sway too much in prayer, because the Rebbe always stood still during prayers and virtually didn't move.

Stories

Stories are a good technique to help us remember things we learn from the Torah itself. The Torah wasn't given to us to be a dry book of rules, with each line containing one law after another after another. Rather the Torah was written in the form of a story.

For example, the Torah wanted to emphasize the gravity of "brotherly hatred"—so instead of writing how serious and prohibited fraternal strife is, the Torah tells us the story of Joseph and his brothers. And here we are, 3,000 years later, getting emotional all anew every time we read the story of how Joseph was sold by his very brothers. They've made endless movies, plays and books of the story, and the story has succeeded in doing what hundreds of hours of lectures and speeches would never do.

Or, for example, the Torah wanted to sharpen the seriousness of the sin of idol worship. The fact that the Jewish Nation heard “You shall not make for yourselves any graven image...” at Mt. Sinai didn’t have much effect on them. But it is specifically when the Torah tells us of the Golden Calf fiasco, and all the negative results that flowed from it, that the gravity of the sin of idol worship penetrates the bones of every Jew.

Song

Another method of remembering that we learn from the Torah itself is the Ta’amei HaMikrah, the Cantillation Notes.

The way we read the Torah is not to just recite it, but rather, to chant it. If you look at any Chumash—you won’t find it in the Torah scroll itself—you’ll notice one or two little symbols above each Hebrew word. These symbolize specific combinations of notes. The Revi’i symbol, for example, is six notes that first rise a bit and then fall. The Mercha symbol is two or three notes. By reviewing the Chumash text and memorizing the symbols, the Torah reader remembers which symbols to sing for which words when he reads the actual Torah scroll text.

One of the main reasons for this system is so that when you essentially turn the entire Torah text into one giant song, it’s easier to remember. And as we see clearly, a prayer that is commonly sung is remembered by everyone—like the Aleinu prayer we say at the end of prayers, or the first paragraph of Birkas HaMazon, the Grace after Meals prayer. What you sing, you remember.

Emotional Experiences

As everyone knows, memory problems exist more among men than women.

Us men will forget what we ate for breakfast in the morning and where we're supposed to go. Women, on the other hand, remember everything—even what you want them to forget, they remember. This is especially true when a couple gets into a fight—the wife will remind her husband of all his transgressions from the day he came into existence, while he just stands there, suddenly completely powerless. And even if he's right, he suddenly doesn't remember any details that would allow him to defend himself and make his case.

So now we can ask: Why do women not forget anything—remembering details upon details?

Some top psychologists say that since women are more emotional, every life experience is an emotional experience (or at least more of an emotional experience), affecting their hearts.

Men, however, could have the very same experience—but they only think about it at the moment it occurs. They don't get emotionally involved. With women, there's that emotional connection to the event—and when you've got an emotional connection to an event, whatever it may be, it makes its mark on the heart, and so you never forget it.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion of Bechukosai.

Chakikah

The Rebbe frequently quoted Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Rebbe of Chabad, who said that the root word of “Bechukosai” is also chakika, which means “engraving”—as in etching words into stone. According to the Alter Rebbe, the Rebbe would note, the lesson is that just like an engraved letter becomes an inseparable part of the stone, so too must the Torah become engraved in our hearts until it becomes inseparable from our personalities.

But how do we accomplish that? How do we cause the Torah to be engraved within us? That happens when we connect to the Torah in an emotional way. As long as our Torah study is merely intellectual, it’s all fine and good—but it never becomes part of our existence. But when our Torah study is an emotional experience, then it becomes something we never forget.

And that’s something that everyone knows from personal experience.

If you’ve ever visited the Kotel, the Western Wall, and got really emotional while there, it’s an experience that you won’t forget. Or, if you come across a concept that you strongly connect to emotionally, one that really speaks to you, you’ll remember it for decades to come.

Nowadays there are a good number of organizations that try to attract youth intellectually, by reaching their minds with classes and lectures, etc. But what’s important is to connect Judaism with a Jew’s feelings.

From the standpoint of knowledge, the young generation would seem to know a lot more about Judaism than its parents knew about Judaism—but what’s missing is the emotional connection to the Torah of Israel, and to the Nation of Israel.

We have plenty of intellectualism. What we really need is to raise kids with Jewish feeling.

And so the Rebbe’s approach was specifically through the “Mivtzoyim,” the Mitzvah Campaigns like going around and putting tefillin on Jewish men, etc. Because something that a person does connects to him in a more emotional way than something that he only learns. And even with learning and study, by the way, the Sages say that this should be “in the place [meaning, subject] that his heart desires”—because then he will love what he’s learning.

And what we love, we don’t forget. As the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 106b) tells us, “G-d desires the heart.”

Good Shabbos!