



FROM THE DESK OF RABBI MOSHE HAUER

OU EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT



Memory, Identity, and Positivity

Memory is identity. This was expressed beautifully by Rabbi Sacks z”l in his Haggadah commentary:

“There is a profound difference between history and memory. History is *his* story – an event that happened sometime else to someone else. Memory is *my* story – something that happened to me and is part of who I am. History is information. Memory, by contrast, is part of identity. I can study the history of other peoples, cultures, and civilizations. They deepen my knowledge and broaden my horizons. But they do not make a claim on me. They are the past as past. Memory is the past as present, as it lives on in me. Without memory there can be no identity.”

The Rebbe of Slonim, author of *Nesivos Shalom*, wrote similarly regarding the *sheish zechiros*, the six incidents that we are mandated to always remember (*Kuntrus Haharuga Alecha*):

“The essence of a Jew is not transient, limited to the time he spends on this earth, rather the Jew’s existence is eternal, embracing the past, the present, and the future... The connection we forge to the eternity inherent in our Jewish soul and to

the world of Klal Yisrael is accomplished through the *zechiros*, the core elements that comprise our national memory. When a Jew remembers Sinai, the Exodus, or the perpetual threat personified by *Amalek*, etc., this binds him to both his own eternal soul and to the world of Klal Yisrael, and the more we connect to that eternity the more we are nourished by it.”

Our Parsha contains two of the Torah’s six critical elements of memory, *Amalek* and Miriam. Remembering the perpetual threat of *Amalek* is sadly and unsurprisingly core to our Jewish identity; we can never afford complacency relative to the ongoing physical and spiritual threats that arise in each and every generation. But why is the same true of the memory of Miriam’s leprosy, a result of her speaking critically of Moshe? While we understand the terrible damage caused by harmful speech and recognize the Mitzvah value of *shemiras halashon* (guarded speech), in what way does this memory and vigilance constitute a critical part of our identity?

Magen Avraham (OC 60:1) cites a fascinating passage from the Kabbalistic teachings (Shaar Hakavanos) of Rav Yitzchak Luria, the *Arizal*, where he suggests that we should explicitly recall each of those six core elements of memory around our recitation of the *Shema* every morning. Regarding remembering Miriam, he posits that when we say the words *v’keiravtanu l’shimcha hagadol selah b’emes, l’hodos*

l'cha, speaking of Hashem's bringing us close to Him in order that we can express our gratitude to Him, it is then that we should recall what happened to Miriam, as "we were created to be grateful rather than to speak negatively." This idea is expressed in the well-known verse (Tehillim 34:13) that speaks of guarding our speech: "Who is the man who desires life, loves days, to see good."

The opposite of slander is not silence but effusive positivity and gratitude, and a non-cynical, grateful mindset is indeed a matter of identity. There is no greater identifier than one's name, and we are all named Jews, *Yehudim*, meaning – grateful people. That gratefulness colors how we look at each other, at life, and at G-d.

It is not only historical events and experiences that forge identity. Our identity will also be an expression of our attitude and perspective. Gratitude and positivity is a huge part of that. Recalling Miriam, and expressing that memory through an attitude and perspective of positivity and gratitude, is a fundamental part of who we are and who we are meant to be. ■

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