

Senior Connections discussion– May 19, 2020

“Why is memory so important in Judaism? Or is it?

Led by Russ Linden

In Deuteronomy, parasha Ki Tavo, Moses delivers a discourse to the Israelites. It's the last day of his life. He's reminding the Israelites to follow God's laws. But then he changes and refers to a key moment in our history: Moses tells the children of Israel the words we read in the Haggadah every Pesach. Here's the passage:

“My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great, powerful and populous nation. The Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our suffering, our harsh labor and our distress. The Lord then brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great fearsomeness and with signs and wonders.”

[\(Deut. 26:5-10\)](#)

Moses suddenly goes from reciting laws to telling the people what they must remember. What's going on here?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief Rabbi of Great Britain, writes that this passage is about the singular importance of **memory** in the lives of the Jews. Here are some of the rabbi's comments. (NOTE: I have put in bold type the portions that are especially relevant to our discussion):

One reason religion has survived in the modern world despite four centuries of secularization is that it answers the three questions every reflective human being will ask at some time in his or her life: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live?

“Who am I?” is not simply a matter of where I was born, where I spent my childhood or my adult life or of which country I am a citizen. Nor is it answered in

terms of what I do for a living, or what are my interests and passions. These things are about *where* I am and *what* I am but not *who* I am...

... for most of us, identity lies in uncovering the story of our ancestors, which, in the case of Jews ... is almost always a tale of journeys, courage, suffering or escapes from suffering, and sheer endurance.

... Identity is not just a matter of who my parents were. It is also a matter of what they remembered and handed on to me...

The Jews were the first people to see God in history, the first to see an overarching meaning in history, and **the first to make memory a religious duty.**

That is why Jewish identity has proven to be the most tenacious the world has ever known: the only identity ever sustained by a minority dispersed throughout the world for two thousand years ... **We are what we remember ...**

... If you forget the story, you will lose your identity. There is such a thing as a national equivalent of Alzheimer's. **Who we are depends on what we remember.**

Jews have told the story of who we are for longer and more devotedly than any other people on the face of the earth. That is what makes Jewish identity so rich and resonant... You have to renew memory regularly and teach it to the next generation... **Those who tell the story of their past have already begun to build their children's future.**

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jonathan Safran Foer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Jonathan" on the left and "Safran Foer" on the right, all contained within a single large, sweeping stroke.

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Rabbi Sacks says that “**We are what we remember.**”

1. What do you think he means by that?

2. Do you agree with him?

3. What do you know about Judaism that you want to remember?