

Our Sixth Sense

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Today, I want to focus on a sixth sense. In his book, *Everything Is Illuminated*, Jonathan Safran Foer wrote, “Jews have six senses. Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing...memory. While [others may] experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins.”

Not everyone is like this. In Leo Tolstoy’s short story, “The Emperor’s Three Questions,” he writes, “there is only one important time and that is now. The present moment is the only time over which we have dominion. The most important person is always the person you are with, who is right before you, for who knows if you will have dealings with any other person in the future? The most important pursuit is making the person standing at your side happy, for that alone is the pursuit of life.”

I’m not sure Judaism agrees.

Part of what religions try to do is to help us to live in the moment. To be present for our lives. Judaism too tries to help us do this - to say a bracha before we eat, to awake each day with gratitude - but I’m not convinced that the Jewish ideal is living only in the moment. We live with six senses. This year, perhaps more than other years, I have wanted to live with memory.

When my father died in November, I felt exposed. I felt like a hole in the ozone layer had opened, leaving me closer to the vacuum of space, like it was harder to breathe. My father was alive during the depression and World War II. He told me about how his father, my grandfather, fought in World War I and, when he was five years old, he saw Buffalo Bill in person in a parade in Cody, Wyoming. When my dad died, it felt like my access to history had been shortened. When he was alive, I think I felt a sense of pride in being connected to his life - he once met Einstein; after WWII, he and a few other engineers were tasked with developing a way for the US to monitor whether the Soviets had tested an atomic bomb. There were no satellites, no other “people working on that” - it was just my dad and a few other engineers who sat down in a room, thought about it, and figured out that if they could place sensors on the top of mountains in a few key places in the world, they’d know. Through my dad, I was connected to history, to this other time. I still have his life. I still have those stories but in losing him, I lost first person access.

שְׁאַל אֲבִיךָ וְיַגִּדְךָ, זְקֵנֶיךָ וְיֹאמְרוּ לְךָ “Inquire of generations gone by, they will tell you; ask your parents, they will inform you” (Deuteronomy 32:7). But if I have a question about what came before, I can’t go ask my father anymore. There will be no more newness to what he can teach me about my past.

Living just in the present doesn’t feel perfect. I do not want to be just this moment. I want to be many moments. I want to feel with six senses.

I think the ideal Jewish moment is noisy and crowded. Today we hear the shofar, but we don’t just hear one shofar. In our shofar, we hear other shofars. Of Jews around the world. Of Jews throughout the generations.

Beth El on Rosh Hashanah is a great place. But part of its greatness is that this room, this community is steeped in memory. Of people who are here and people whose spirit we feel. This is our last Rosh Hashanah with the room configured just like this. Next year we’ll be in the Carolina Theater and the year after, God willing, we’ll be facing that way, east, and the memorial boards will be over there and the ark will be there, and we will be the ones who say, “I remember! I remember that year in the Carolina Theater. I remember when we used to face South.” We will soon be the ones whose memories reach back to today. It will feel good to remember, and be remembered.

2017 has been a year of memory, and not only for me because my father died. Perhaps one can do this with many dates in history, but it has seemed to me that 2017 is a year that echoes with modern Jewish history. 2017 is 120 years since the first Zionist Congress in 1897 when the dream of modern Israel was born. It is 100 years since the Balfour Declaration in 1917 when the right of Jews to a national home was first recognized by international law. It is 70 years since 1947. To know the story of a place, you have to know the dates they name streets after. In Jerusalem, in Katamon, there is a street called Kaf Tet B’November - the 29th of November. It was on the 29th of November, 1947 that the United Nations General Assembly voted 33 to 13 in favor of a resolution which adopted a plan for the partition of Palestine to include a Jewish State. 2017 is 50 years since the Six-Day War in 1967 when Israel was threatened with annihilation by Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq and not only survived, but conquered Jerusalem and the West Bank and the Sinai and the Golan Heights. And it is 50 years since Israel began its domination of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip without giving them a voice in Israel’s democratically elected parliament.

Over the summer, I had lunch with Ivy Wingate. We’ve both been in mourning this year and she asked me: what is a gift your father gave you that you want to remember? I told her my father gave me a sense of confidence that I could do anything, but that constant encouragement - “you

can start a business” “you can write a book” “you can run for office” - had an edge to it; it came with a sense that maybe whatever I did wasn't enough. As we said goodbye, Ivy gave her rabbi a blessing. She said, “I bless you that, as the years go by, you will only remember the sweetness.” I am grateful for her blessing, but I'm not sure I agree.

Remembering is, by its very nature, partial. It is “re-membering,” reconstructing parts into a whole that is coherent but cannot be what was. But the memory I crave is the whole thing, the whole person, the whole place.

We are here on the High Holidays to reflect on what is timeless, not just timely. The significance of Israel for modern Jewish identity lies far beyond a particular policy or government; Israel is the most audacious project of the Jewish people since the Temple was destroyed 2,000 years ago and it deeply impacts Jewishness in our time. While the modern State of Israel is a secular institution, the fact that it is a mechanism for protecting 6.5 million Jews, nearly 43% of the world's Jewish population, makes Israel's survival and prosperity a vital Jewish imperative.

This is true because Judaism is not only a religion. It is not a set of ideas to which one must subscribe; in fact, attempts to fix Judaism's core beliefs have been vigorously resisted. As the scholar Moshe Halbertal wrote in his recent magisterial work on Maimonides, [Maimonides' formulation] “of binding principles of faith – principles that form the basis for membership in the community of Israel and define who has left that community – was a truly revolutionary step in the history of Jewish thought...the sages of the Talmud never formulated principles of faith. (Halbertal, 137).”

When someone comes to me to convert, I explain this basic fact to them. That when the Talmud, in Yevamot 47b, considers what one should say to a person who wants to convert, the first question is not about belief, it is about belonging: “Do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised harassed and overcome by afflictions? [In other words, “This is hard! Why would you want to do this?”]” The Talmud continues, “If that person replies, I know and yet am unworthy,” [meaning, I know and I still want to do this with all my heart, that person] is accepted immediately, and is given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments.” About the importance of caring for the poor, some basic Jewish theology – you're going to be obligated for more things than you were before – but, we are told, that person “is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much” and if they accept these things, there is circumcision (for a man) and then off to the mikvah and, “when s/he comes up from the mikvah, s/he is deemed to be Jewish in all respects.”

What is at play here is that, from a religious perspective, Jewish identity is not primarily religious. Rabbi David Hartman writes about this in his book, *A Heart of Many Rooms*:

Judaism doesn't begin with Sinai, with revelation or a leap of faith, but with Egypt, with empathy for a suffering community of slaves. The community of suffering precedes the community that received the word of God at Sinai. Pesach precedes Shavuot. Pesach is the beginning of the story that makes Sinai possible. The language of Sinai is heard by a people, by a group of individuals who have become a collective. Sinaitic revelation is unintelligible to people who have no sense of history, no sense of empathy for community, no sense of family. [The biblical] Ruth's confession of faith and loyalty to Judaism expresses this very idea, "...your people shall be your people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16)."

First your people shall be my people, and then your God will be my God. To be a Jew is to bind one's destiny to the destiny of the Jewish people, not in theory, but *really*. Perhaps one could argue that the State of Israel is not vital to the survival of the Jewish people, but 70 years after the Shoah when one third of the Jewish people were systematically murdered while the world closed its doors to Jews and did nothing, one may not dismiss the safety of the Jewish people as a hysterical concern, nor may one ignore the reality that the State of Israel is a powerful mechanism for ensuring that nearly half of the world's Jews are kept safe by its existence, and that the rest of the world's Jewish population have it as a refuge if, God forbid, such a need were to arise. To ignore Israel on the High Holy Days, while perhaps less risky for me as a rabbi in the short term, threatens to weaken our community's connection to the Jewish people around the world.

Please hear me: I am NOT saying that anyone who disagrees with what I've just described is unwelcome at Beth El – God forbid – or is no longer Jewish – God forbid. As I said above, Judaism has always resisted efforts to formulate principles of faith to which one must subscribe to be a Jew. Beth El's doors are welcome to all Jews. Period. What I am saying is that, as a rabbi, I believe the continued existence of Israel is a religious imperative with which Jews must wrestle, in the way that we must wrestle and respond to other religious imperatives.

And. So is the suffering of Palestinians living under Jewish sovereignty in the State of Israel.

More than any other commandment, 36 times the Torah commands us to be careful how we treat the stranger who will live in our midst under our sovereignty in the land of Israel because "you know the feelings of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). As the people prepare to enter the land of Israel, Moses tells them that they themselves were slaves in the land of Egypt, something that is historically false – the generation who were slaves in the land had already died out. Moses is not giving a faithful description of a historical fact; he is making a normative charge to the nation. Because of our historical experience of suffering – the same collective suffering that is so core to Jewish identity that empathy with that suffering later becomes a condition for converting to Judaism – that same collective suffering has normative

power: when you are sovereign in the land of Israel, you may not oppress the resident alien, the non-Jew who has little or no legal power to protect herself.

Too often, those who express deep concern about the morality of Israel's treatment of Palestinians are accused of being anti-Israel by self-appointed guardians of what constitutes pro-Israel discourse in the Jewish community. According to a recent study by the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University, "the tenor of campus debates [about Israel and Palestine] and the expectations about what others think students should feel and how they should identify often result in student disengagement from both political discourse and from the campus Jewish community." The disengagement of some of our most passionate and committed young Jews helps no one. Expression of concern for Palestinian suffering is not anti-Israel. It is pro-Israel, because concern for the stranger in our midst is a deep concern of the Torah itself.

Jewish memory is not just Jewish. In his book, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in the aftermath of 1967, "We mourn the loss of lives, the devastation, the fruits of violence. We mourn the deaths of Jews, Christians, Moslems. The screams of anguish are not to be lost to our conscience...A few days following the end of the six-day war, [Israeli Chief of Staff, General Yizhak Rabin said], 'The joy of our soldiers is incomplete and their celebrations are marred by sorrow and shock. The men in the front lines were witness not only to the glory of victory, but the price of victory; their comrades who fell beside them bleeding. The terrible price which our enemies paid touched the hearts of many of our men as well. It may be that the Jewish people never learned and never accustomed itself to feel the triumph of conquest and victory, and we receive it with mixed feelings.'"

I want to receive our triumphs with mixed feelings. I want to remember the victory and relief, the sweetness and salvation of 1967, and the horrors of war and the moral complexity that ensued the moment that war ended, and that continues to this very day. I want to experience Israel fully, not as the caricature that appears on network news, but as a real place with real people. I want to remember that Israel is a place where Palestinians suffer, and I want to remember that Israel is an answer to what the world called "the Jewish question." I want to feel gratitude that Israel is a refuge and I want to remember that Israel is a work unfinished; it is not a privilege but a challenge to responsibility whose ultimate meaning is, as Heschel writes, "in terms of the vision of the prophets: the redemption of all...The religious duty of the Jew is to participate in the process of continuous redemption, in seeing that justice prevails over power..."

I want to be present to my life, but I don't want to merely live in the moment. I can't remember everything. I can't bring my father back. Some of his stories are gone forever; I can no longer go to him to ask what happened before. But the alternative is not just to forget and let go.

In his more recent book, *Here I Am*, Jonathan Safran Foer says all forms of wrestling - arm wrestling, wrestling with faith - have “one one thing in common: closeness. You only get to keep what you refuse to let go of... What we don’t wrestle we let go of. Love isn’t the absence of struggle. Love is struggle.”

To be Jewish is to struggle, to remember, to be close. In life’s richest moments, I am not alone. I am connected. To my father. To what and to whom came before. I am connected to you; I am connected to Israel; I am connected to all humanity, and to all that lives. My voice joins the words of the prayer, “*V’Chol HaHayim Yoducha Selah*” - Let all life thank you, Selah!”

This Rosh Hashanah, I wish us a good and sweet year, but not a year of fairytales and forgetting. I wish us a year of memory. I hope our lives are noisy and complicated, filled with memories of the past and hopes for the future, far beyond the present moment. I hope you are interrupted by people coming to your homes to visit and I hope interrupt your life to make Israel stronger and more just for all who live in her borders. That, to me, is a good year; that to me is a sweet year. That is what I wish for us all. L’Shana Tova.