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REMEMBERING AND  
HISTORICAL AWARENESS—  
Part II: PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ASPECTS OF A HALAKHIC STATE  
OF MIND

I

In an earlier article, I examined the various *zakhor* imperatives in biblical literature, where the critical demand or task involves one's remembering key episodes in Jewish history.<sup>1</sup> The topic was approached partly as an epistemological inquiry: how does one obtain philosophically valid knowledge of past events which supposedly can no longer be known immediately? The school of historical positivists, resigned to the belief that the past is, indeed, past, consider non-immediate, second-hand knowledge of history satisfactory. Yet certain aspects of the *zakhor* imperative—such as “Each individual is obligated to envision that he, himself, left Egypt”<sup>2</sup>—suggest the need for truly immediate historical knowledge. Thus, I presented the hypothesis that certain historic data are given in consciousness as archetypes or inherited memory traces for which there is support in biblical and aggadic literature (e.g., Ramban's category: “*Ma'asei avot siman la-banim*”<sup>3</sup>). *Zakhor* had to include some mechanism similar to the idealists' notion of re-living historical data. That is, the process of knowing or remembering history is one of re-enacting in the here-and-now the contents of these memory “traces” in such a way that they become temporally *similar* to and structurally *identical* with the original historic event.<sup>4</sup>

This past *Purim*, while engaged in the elementary, verbal fulfillment of the biblical commandment to “remember and not forget” God's eternal war with Amalek, I began to rethink some unfinished aspects of the hypothesis of archetypal re-living of history, such as

the nature of the relationship between the hypothetically given memory traces, the psychological processes of experiencing re-lived events, and the halakhic parameters of historical remembering. If, as expressed in the earlier essay, that archetypal re-living should actually facilitate, if not make possible, the observance of *mitsvot* involving *zekhirah*, then there is great relevance in refining the relationship between ritual and the subjective experience of remembering. These are the foci of the present essay.

## II

Let us briefly review the halakhic obligations to remember certain historic events, the institutionalization of these remembrances, and the didactic-theological scope of the concept of remembering.

The exodus from Egypt is encountered as an obligatory remembrance, in the biblical command, "Remember this very day that you left Egypt . . . in order that you shall remember the day of your leaving the land of Egypt all the days of your life."<sup>5</sup> Ramban bases the precept of recounting the story of the exodus on the key term *zakhor*.<sup>6</sup> The additional phrase, ". . . in order that you shall remember" (*le-ma'an tizkor*), is the operative for the separate biblical requirement to recall this episode during the recitation of the *shema* credo.<sup>7</sup> The fulfillment of this remembrance must be verbal in addition to being intentional.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, if one were in doubt whether one had mentioned the relevant references in the "*Emet ve-yatsiv*" portion of the *shema*, obviously indicated a lack of appropriate concentration on that portion, it must be repeated.<sup>9</sup> Most authorities maintain that the biblical obligation includes a daily recall of *yetsiat Mitsrayim* (Rambam does not tally this additional aspect as a separate precept).<sup>10</sup> As R. Shlomo b. David notes in his glosses to *Shulhan Arukh*, while the idea of the exodus is not specifically related to the *mitsvah* of *tsitsit*, or the *kiddush* over wine, the Torah "cared for it" and the rabbis included it in the daily recitation of *shema*.<sup>11</sup> The holidays of *Sukkot* and *Pesah*, however, are designated for remembering this event, and, thus, the *Tur* first expands on the essence of *yetsiat Mitsrayim* in his discussion of these festivals.<sup>12</sup>

Remembrance of God's sworn, eternal battle with Amalek for their offensive attack on the wandering Israelites is a twofold biblical obligation: a commissive act to remember (*zakhor*) and a "passive" obligation to not forget (*ve-al tishkah*).<sup>13</sup> This remembrance, too, is reified in a verbal fulfillment (or an aural one: listening to an other fulfilling it verbally) and is instituted (biblically, to some<sup>14</sup>) in the

reading of the relevant Torah passages on the Sabbath before *Purim*, and in the Torah reading for the morning of *Purim*.

The episode of *akeidat Yitshak*, the binding of Isaac—considered by the Talmud to have been an actual sacrifice notwithstanding the literal biblical narrative<sup>15</sup>—is also enumerated as deserving of remembrance and is institutionalized in the Torah readings for *Rosh Hashanah*.<sup>16</sup> R. Joseph Karo, in his *Bet Yosef* commentary to the *Tur Shulḥan Arukh*, writes,

It is worthwhile to recite the portion of the *akeidah* in order to remember the merits of the patriarchs and in order to mold one's inclination, as Isaac gave [*sic*] over his life.<sup>17</sup>

This event is also alluded to in the *tahanunim*, the supplication prayers recited on Mondays and Thursdays: “See before You the binding of one individual for the sake of Israel.” It is of interest that there is no specific biblical reference to remembering the *akeidah*, which I will deal with in a later section.

Other historic events are deemed worthy of recollecting, though not by biblical obligation. Ramban, specifically, considers it a biblical precept to not forget the episode of Revelation because it is written: “Do not forget that which your eyes saw . . . the day you stood before God at Horeb.”<sup>18</sup> He also views the episode of Miriam's affliction<sup>19</sup> with *tsara'at* for speaking disrespectfully of Moshe as a “completely biblical positive commandment” to enhance one's distance from slander and gossip (Rambam accepts this didactic concept when discussing the laws of *tumat tsara'at* and its causes but does not enumerate it as a *mitsvah*<sup>20</sup>).

Ramban also designates obligatory status to remembering the tragic worship of the golden calf and God's subsequent wrath. The obligation to remember includes an obligation upon all generations to confront personal and interpersonal deficiencies. He reasons *a fortiori* that if we must recall the misdeeds of our forefathers, surely it is incumbent to constructively recall our own misdeeds.<sup>21</sup> In fact, two other, more general biblical passages suggest the same need: “Remember the days of old; consider the generations”<sup>22</sup> and “If they shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers. . . . Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob. . . .”<sup>23a</sup> Thus, we have here a concept of cross-generational responsibility through memory.

The kabalist, R. Isaac Luria (d. 1572), instituted the custom of reciting four of these *zakhor* imperatives at the end of daily prayer (*Mitsrayim, Horeb, Amalek, Miriam*) “to assure one a portion in

the world to come.” Others have added the recitation of *zekhirat Shabbat*, the golden calf incident, and the *manna* that fell in the wilderness.<sup>23b</sup>

The phenomenon of *Shabbat*, while unique as a historic event, must also be remembered daily according to some authorities,<sup>24</sup> based on “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”<sup>25</sup> It, too, is remembered verbally in the Sabbath *kiddush*.<sup>26</sup> This remembrance serves in an additional capacity: “Said R. Isaac, ‘Do not count as others count. Rather, count toward the Sabbath.’”<sup>27</sup> Thus, weekdays are numbered “the first day of the Sabbath,” “the second day of the Sabbath,” and so forth. The school of Shamai taught that one must orient one’s weekly pursuits toward the Sabbath and in that fashion remember it.<sup>28</sup> The *Shabbat* is, thus, a concept whose relevance is preserved by anticipation; it is, as R. Shlomo Y. Zevin rightly categorized it, a *zekhirah le-atid*.<sup>29</sup>

The glory of the Temples and the trauma of their destruction are remembered through numerous rabbinic institutions:

observing the quasi-mourning period concurrent with the *s’firat ha-omer*;<sup>30</sup> circling the *bimah* (symbolic of the great altar) on *Hoshanah Rabah*;<sup>31</sup> requiring two breads at each *Shabbat* and festival meal;<sup>32</sup> the *seder* rituals of *korakh*, *z’roa* and *beizah*, and *afikoman*;<sup>33</sup> fasting on all Jewish fasts;<sup>34</sup> refraining from excessively joyous song;<sup>35</sup> leaving unfinished a portion of one’s house;<sup>36</sup> discontinuing the use of ornamental crowns and gold in-lay in the prayer shawls of grooms;<sup>37</sup> obligating one to tear one’s clothes upon seeing the hills of Judea and the city of Jerusalem in their ruin.<sup>38</sup>

As Samson Raphael Hirsch emphasized, every prayer, every Sabbath, and every festival draws symbolic richness from Israel’s historic past. The acquisition of immediate knowledge of the past would seem then to be unquestionably desirable. Yet, is the remembering we engage in toward this goal merely ratiocination or can the individual in the process of remembering somehow converge with the past?

### III

What is the scope and function of the imperative to remember? To be sure, the elemental fulfillment of those actually biblical obligations is achieved by producing the specified verbalization (e.g., reciting the relevant Torah passages) or by executing the specified action (e.g., eating *matsah*). Yet, how, by so doing, is *remembering* actually taking place? To put the issue in other terms, what *state of*

*mind* is required of the individual engaged in fulfillment of a *zakhor* imperative?

To Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik the fulfillment of *zakhor* involves the ability to experience history as an ontical mode of time-in-the-present.<sup>39</sup>

Experiential memory . . . recalls experiences by evoking the feelings of the past event . . . whatever was horrible and frightening should be remembered as horrible and frightening, no matter how much time has elapsed since the event transpired. . . . In short, when remembering the past, the Jew relives the event as if it were a present reality.

Rabbi Soloveitchik does not use the term archetype which I proposed as a mechanism for re-living, yet he is emphasizing the same point.

Elsewhere, using the Bergsonian notion of “qualitative time”, Rabbi Soloveitchik states:<sup>40</sup>

Upon this phenomenon of an historical continuum was founded the strength of *Masoreh*, conceived as an historic stream of Jewish spirit whose tributaries of past, present, and future *merged in each other*. This is real historic consciousness. *This is qualitative consciousness*. Quantitative time creates but archeological consciousness of periods gone by that do not infiltrate into one’s own ego existence.

The following points can be distilled from this description: (1) remembering or historical awareness is an experience of re-living; (2) it is a process of re-enacting the past in the present—a merging of subjective presentness and an experience of pastness (this phenomenology basically characterizes the contents of archetypal memory); (3) the goal is an experience of inter-esse with past personalities, enhanced by empathic relating to past experients, similar to the way psychotherapists attempt to experience, and thereby *know* their patients’ experiences. Consider, for example, Greenson’s description, “I have to let part of me become the patient, and I have to go through his experiences as if I were the patient, and to introspect what is going on inside me as they occur.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, (4) this process of re-living involves a qualitative and subjectively experienced change in ego state (or “ego existence,” in Rabbi Soloveitchik’s words). As Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, “We live in the Jews of the past with the Jews of the present.”<sup>42</sup> These elements, then, characterize an authentic fulfillment of, for example, the obligation to “envision oneself” as having had actually participated in and as also currently historically participating in the exodus from Egypt.

Before proceeding further, I think it appropriate to add the relevant reflections of a secular observer. Writing on the contemporary affliction of the sense of “existential outcastness” in members of modern society, Robert J. Lifton considers that a contributing factor to the sudden interest in religious observance (manifested in the healthy searching of *ba’alei teshuvah* as well as in the misguided attraction of modern youth to pseudo-religious cults) has been the weakening of “traditional modes of continuity” between past and present, persons and achievements, and the sense of symbolic immortality.<sup>43</sup> By this he means something quite similar to the theme of this paper: the presentness of an individual is always inextricably related to a psychologically healthy sense of both the immediate and historic past, enhanced by symbolic paradigms which mediate reality and lend significance to certain intangibles, fantasies, aspirations, and fears and paradoxes of everyday living. Contemporary man, however, in attempting to replace the symbolic and the transitional with “understanding” has, in retrospect, lost both! Hence, the religio-psychological significance of *zakhor* imperatives.

#### IV

Psychology has much of relevance to our discussion of the state of mind apparently advocated in the preceding view. Initially, I will focus on salient observations which suggest an inherent danger in or the pathological nature of such a state of mind.

The growth and development of the normal personality involves the relative unimpairment of basic abilities ranging from accurate perception, reality-testing, and the exercise of judgment to the more popularly recognized “psychological” processes of impulse control, synthetic-integrative functions, autonomy of the ego from instinctual demands, etc. (Certainly, environmental variables such as innate disposition, the influence of family and social system, etc. are also involved, but I mean to focus on psychological processes.) By far, one of the most critical requirements for the successful operation of any of these other variables is the establishment of distinct “reality frames”; that is, maintaining the distinctions between dream, illusion, and reality; animate and inanimate; inner and other realities; past and present; self and other; and concrete and metaphor. Searles, Winnicott, Fast, and others have pointed out that problems in maintaining these distinctions count significantly in the nature of some of the more severe psychopathologies such as borderline conditions and frank psychosis.<sup>44</sup>

An important contribution of both Searles’ and Winnicott’s

analyses is that during early stages of development, reality frames are not rightly considered confused or dedifferentiated, but rather as not yet existent, such that for the infant, until approximately one year, "illusion" is reality—self and other, past and present, inner and outer, concrete and metaphor are identical. Early developmental stages, such as the transitional phase of infancy, is an intermediate time, "the root of symbolism," along the journey from pure subjectivity to objectivity. Symbolism proper is employed when an individual already clearly distinguishes between fantasy and fact, inner and outer realities, etc. And, as Searles puts it, the differences between these aspects of objective reality could never develop if there had not been once a *lack* of such distinctions, as there is during infancy. Only in psychopathology—or, temporarily, in the creative mystical or artistic state of mind—are these distinctions, previously established to one degree or another, actually *dedifferentiated* or fused.

Searles illustrates the dedifferentiation of concrete and metaphor as follows:<sup>45</sup>

What we call fantasy, a product of the imagination, is experienced [by dedifferentiated patients] as an actual and undisguised attribute of the world around him, . . . and concrete is seen only as a symbol [e.g., one schizophrenic patient remarked, "Whenever you see a Yale lock or a Schlage lock, it's part of the Chain System"]. *Memories of past events are experienced not as "memories," but rather as literal reenactments of those events.*

Indeed, gaps of consciousness wherein past and present are indissolubly merged is a frequently encountered characteristic of severely disturbed patients. Reality testing and its adjuvant functions are severely compromised when reality frames are characteristically dedifferentiated or confused, or were never appropriately established during the early stages of human cognitive development.

While Searles' analysis is clinically oriented, Winnicott, as Freud before him, suggested that his notion of the transitional period (with cognitive or psychological features similar to Searles' description of dedifferentiation) also applies to certain social institutions.<sup>46</sup>

I am staking a claim for an intermediate state between a baby's inability and his growing ability to recognize and accept reality. I am studying the substances of *illusion*, that which is allowed to the infant, *and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion*, and yet can become the hallmark of madness. . . . It is assumed that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). . . .

Against this background, it would seem that to re-live the past in such a way as to undergo a qualitative change in “one’s ego existence”—to subjectively experience the past as present, to fuse the metaphoric or symbolic reality of *matsah* with an experience of actually partaking in the pascal offering, to contemporaneously experience the fast of *Tishah b’Av* with the identical agonies and sensations of loss experienced by the original historic personae—is a regression to a dedifferentiated state of mind, a state of mind which can be characteristic of psychic imbalance. Perhaps this sort of experience was involved in the destructive consequences shared by three of the four talmudic scholars who dared to enter *Pardes*, the realm of the innermost cognitive and spiritual depths of Torah. Save R. Akiva, the fusion of earthly and heavenly knowledge, of past and present, of this-worldliness and other-worldliness caused ben Azai to go beserk, ben Zoma to die, and confused Elisha ben Abuyah to the point of apostasy.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, the *zakhor* imperative of *sipur yetsiat Mitsrayim* was institutionalized without a blessing precisely because its fulfillment is without limit—*kol ha-marbeh harei zeh me’shubah*.<sup>48</sup> If this *mitsvah* optimally involves the state of re-living the past, then the danger of becoming lost in a dedifferentiated state is paramount. And one again speculates that perhaps such fusion of reality frames caused R. Eliezer and his colleagues, while engaged in the telling of *yetsiat Mitsrayim* one well-known Pesah, to lose track of time, to be found by their students still involved in the telling well into the next morning.<sup>49</sup>

If, on the other hand, dedifferentiation of reality frames—specifically, between past and present and between own experience and others’ experience—in the fulfillment of required religio-historic experience is to be considered an intermediate zone of creative experience, and not merely some transitional psychotic episode, certain parameters must be respected which allow such dedifferentiation to occur productively and with minimal risk. I believe such parameters can be discerned in the larger halakhic system surrounding the process of *mitsvah* fulfillment.

## V

There are several halakhic parameters in an observance of *zakhor* which serve to modulate the quality and extent of the qualitative change in ego state characteristic of re-experiencing historic events.



The first relevant parameter is that each *zakhor* imperative is reified in the form of precisely delimited rituals, such as reading a specific portion of the Torah, reciting the three words “*zekher li-ytsiat Mitsrayim*,” eating a specific amount of *matsah*, whose appropriate enactment must occur within the constraints of specified times for performance, proportion of performance, criteria for fulfillment in the first place (*le-khathilah*) or after the fact (*be-de'aved*), of who is and who is not obligated by the *mitsvah*, and so forth. *Zakhor* obligations must be fulfilled through the required verbalizations or acts before they are broadened by subjective experience. Thus, the ritual itself serves as a consensually validated frame of reference.

Related to the delimitation of rituals is the issue of whether intentionality and subjective understanding (*kavanah*) are necessary in order to basically fulfill *mitsvah* obligations. While many obligations are considered fulfilled even where the performer does not exercise *kavanah*, following the view that *mitsvot einom tsrikhot kavanah*, all *mitsvot* require at least the elemental, objective understanding that one is involved in fulfilling the word of God; that one is, in fact, doing a specific *mitsvah*. In still other cases, even where *kavanah la-tset*, strictly interpreted, is absent, certain inferred experiences of “ownership” of the *mitsvah* (such as the gustatorial pleasure experienced while consuming *matsah*)<sup>51</sup> are acceptable for basic fulfillment.

In other words, consciousness of the contemporaneous fulfillment of a *mitsvah* through a specifically defined enactment whose essential nature is symbolic (“*Matsah—al shum moh?*”) and temporally non-transferable, serves to anchor the religionist in the world where symbol and concrete, history and current experience are differentiated.<sup>52</sup> If partaking of the *sukkah* experience promotes re-living the Israelites’ wanderings in the desert under the protective glory cloud, this experience is delimited by the category *taishvu ke’ain taduru*: i.e., insofar as the fulfillment of one’s obligations is concerned, the *sukkah* is a ritual structure of wood and bough, not a glory cloud, and must satisfy the requirements of a contemporary dwelling.<sup>53</sup> Dedifferentiated as one might be, halakhah considers one who remains in the *sukkah* during a rainstorm a *hedyot*, a simpleton. Cognizance of having to be *yotseh*, of having to discharge one’s obligations, can only take place while in the yet differentiated ego state; where the actor knows that it is he, in the present, who fulfills the obligation and not his alter-ego as a re-lived historic personification. Regression to the experience of dedifferentiation can occur around the rituals, but only in addition to the awareness, necessary at

some point, that the root of the experience begins and ends in the differentiation of the objective act *as symbol* from subsequent psychological experiences. For, unlike his historic forebears for whom the experience in question was pristine, the contemporary religionist's experience is an obligation.

It should already be obvious that a third parameter serving as a reality-preserving constraint is the religionist's ability to oscillate freely in and out of the dedifferentiated state that follows the enactment of a *zakhor* imperative. The religionist methodically prepares for such qualitative changes in ego existence prior to the experience, sometimes "thirty days preceding the festival."<sup>54</sup> He is, in other words, not overtaken by sudden lapses into dedifferentiation, but rather anticipates these as momentary opportunities for shared experiences. He readies himself with the proper appurtenances and knowledge of the details attendant to the optimal performance of the *mitsvah*. Understood, too, is that he must eventually forsake these dedifferentiated, intermediate zones of experience so that other obligations can be fulfilled: at 11:30 P.M. Passover eve, he may be on the road from Egypt, staff, sack, and *matsah* in hand, but by the next morning he must be capable of attending to the daily prayers for the first day of Passover. And thus did R. Eliezer and his colleagues return to the differentiated state by confronting the urgent halakhic demand of *z'man kriot shema*.

Poets or artists, in the production of their most significant and creative works, cross or fuse the distinctions between various reality frames, yet within an overriding or prevailing conscious sense of controlling such dedifferentiation so that it produces a consensually meaningful product, and with the ability to oscillate freely in and out of the undifferentiated state. Such states, then, are temporary regressions in the service of creativity. To the degree that this latter quality is compromised by independent psychological conflicts does the artist or poet, or the religious mystic, experience actually destructive psychic breakdown. Thus did R. Akiva partake of *Pardes* unscathed — "*ve-Rabi Akiva nikhnat ba-shalom ve-yatsa ba-shalom*," he was able to regress adaptively into and then differentiate out of the intermediate zone of the innermost depths of Torah.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, the *zakhor* experience is not a defense. It may imply a dissatisfaction with the continuous turning of history, and surely can express a yearning for the future or a need to rework the present through the past, but it does not disguise an *inability to function* in the present world, nor is it a neurotic repetition.

Leaving the intermediate zone is depressing, anxiety-provoking; it awakens in us childhood sensations of loss and disillusionment and

