

Zakhor

Memory, Ritual, and Gender

by Norma Baumel Joseph

Les rites et les coutumes juives qui visent à garder la mémoire collective en vie rendent souvent l'expérience des femmes invisibles. À partir de trois rituels, l'auteure démontre comment les femmes pourraient prendre une part plus active dans la communauté juive.

Jewish tradition recognizes the power of memory and finds unique ways to ritualize that faculty.

Zakhor, the biblical commandment to remember, has been a fundamental responsibility of the Jewish people throughout history. It is enshrined in the Ten Commandments by association with the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8) and liturgically elevated through the *Yizkor* memorial prayer for the dead. Jewish tradition recognizes the power of memory and finds unique ways to ritualize and concretize that faculty. It plays a major part in our understanding and conception of Judaism and Jewish community life. Presumably, it has been one of the keys to Jewish survival. Yet I find it one of the most enigmatic and paradoxical concepts to understand.

Beginning with Passover, the yearly cycle of holiday celebrations constantly reverberates with commemoration. From remembering one's ancestors to recalling one's enemies, there is a flow to the year that rests on an assumption of a consistent, continuous, and common collective memory.

That is a lot of remembrance. Difficult and time consuming, presumptuous even, but what is so paradoxical and why am I so troubled?

There are two parts to the enigma of Jewish memory that I would like to explore in this initial essay:

1. What do we really mean when

we say "Remember!" How do we accomplish that mandate: how do we live it.

2. Whom do we remember: whose story do we tell and how do we tell it? The memories of women, like their voices, have been neglected and silenced. In the vast compendium of our heritage there is a rich field of women's memories that await our transformative inclusion.

What does it mean to remember?

In the introduction to his insightful book *Zakhor*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi poses some interesting historiographic questions.

We should at least want to know what kind of history the Jews have valued, what out of their past, they chose to remember, and how they preserved, transmitted, and revitalized that which was recalled. (xiv)

Yerushalmi is reminding us that memory involves choice and some form of action. For both the historian and the participant, not everything is worthy of recognition, retention, and celebration. Yet, that which is chosen is exceptionally influential. Judith Plaskow maintains that it is in the retelling of our past stories "that we learn who we truly are in the present" (40).¹

Moreover, as noted above, Judaism embraces memory as a religious obligation. Memory may seem elusive and fleeting to us, yet the Bible has no difficulty in commanding memory. The verb *zakhor* and its variations occur in the Hebrew Bible 229 times. As a noun it is found 47 times (Childs). Unconditional and pivotal, memory is an obligation upon both God and the people of Israel. It is the foundation of the covenant that binds the two. We

must remember; we are forbidden to forget. And we call upon God to remember. Moses brings the message of God to the slaves in Egypt not in the name of "The Creator of Heaven and Earth" but as the God of their ancestors, the One Who Remembers (Ex. 3:16 and 4:31). Additionally, the decalogue introduces God as the One who acts in history.

Thus, Jews have survived as a people with a clear sense of a collective memory. It is, of course, not anything genetic or physiological but rather a social reality, transmitted and sustained through the conscious efforts and institutions of the group. For Jews memory is not merely the subject of history. It does not belong to the historians. It is more than a mere recording of acts and facts. Rather memory is perceived and received as an integral, pivotal aspect of communal religious life. God is found in history, but it is a very special kind of story. As Jonathan Boyarin notes, Judaism manages to use story to extend divine authority into historical time and locate the people of Israel in God's time as well!

How do we remember?

There are many ways that a community can use memory to establish itself. Most frequently the retelling of story reinforces a collective experience. For Jews that retelling has many facets, three of which expose the paradox that intrigues me.

1. One week before the holiday of *Purim*, the biblical portion that is read in synagogues is known as *Zakhor*:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey after you left Egypt—how undeterred by fear of God he surprised you on the march when you were famished and weary and cut down

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all stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when God grants you safety from all your enemies around you in the land that your lord God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under Heaven. Do not forget! Deut 25:17-19²

Israelites are commanded to remember this particular enemy and eradicate its name. There we have it—the contradiction in all its heavenly power. Remember! Do not forget! But also, blot out the memory! How on earth can a people accomplish both tasks?

The ritual of story-telling on *Purim* offers a further illustration of this disparity. On the holiday of *Purim* Jews insist on telling the full story of peril and survival experienced thousands of years ago in Persia. Part of the ritualized story includes repeating Haman, the villain's name, frequently. Haman is supposed to be Amalek's descendant, from the tribe of those who are to be remembered and erased. However, he is not called the "unnamed one." His name is pronounced quite clearly and frequently. Jews name him and then make a great deal of noise to drown out the sound of his name. What a charade, what pretense, how effective! The ritual ensures that his name is repeated as it is concealed, hidden in the waves of sound. Is this not exactly how to remember and blot out?

Moreover, tradition links not just Haman, but all persecutors with the evil of Amalek. Even Hitler is called by some "an Amalekite." Thus, Jews continue the ritual tradition even with an historical figure like Hitler.

After mentioning his name many will say, *yemach shmo*, may his name be erased, eradicated. Yet, we refuse to forget; we will not allow his name to be wiped out. We stand vigilant that history books tell the story accurately. We remember so that "never again." We fight the evil of Amalek with our memory, but it is a memory that refuses to become nostalgia or squandered and so we retain the noise for Haman and *yemach sh'mo* for Hitler. What a successful contradiction.

2. The next example of ritualized story-telling comes from the holiday of Passover during which Jews turn memory into performance theatre. On Passover, Jews commemorate and celebrate with *pessah*, *matsa* (unleavened bread), and *maror*. *Pessah* refers to the pascal lamb sacrifice that is remembered with a little piece of roasted meat, the uneaten ceremonial *zroa*.³ In fact, the critical ritual act of Passover for our ancestors was the offering and eating of the lamb in the Temple. All Jews had to partake of this meal. We can no longer keep Passover the way our ancestors kept it. So we ritualize the memory of it, but our memory takes quite different turns. Ashkenazim (Jews of European extraction) remember through avoidance. They do not use lamb at all for the ritual meal. In fact, they do not eat roasted meat at all that night. On the other hand, some Sephardim (Jews of Spanish or Middle Eastern descent) specifically use lamb for the meal and for the *zroa*. Avoidance or imitation, two styles both equally operative in Jewish ritual life that establishes a pattern for memory.

The ritual process proceeds with story-telling that involves eating *matsa* and *maror* and dipping in salt water or lemon juice. This is either theatre of the absurd or human faith in action. Does dipping a vegetable in salt water remind us of tears? Does eating *matsa* make us hurry or feel poor?

Does one second of eating a bitter vegetable (*maror*) equate in any way with the bitterness of slavery? Paradoxically it does.

3. My final example is from the story-telling style of the Passover liturgy. Absurdly, the Passover story of deliverance is frequently told in the first person "I":

In every generation it is one's duty to regard himself as though he personally had gone out of Egypt, as it is written: You shall tell your son on that day: "It was because of this that HASHEM did for 'me' when I went out of Egypt." It was not only our fathers whom the Holy One redeemed from slavery; we too were redeemed with them, as it is written: HE brought "us" out from there so that HE might take us to the land which HE had promised to our Fathers. Ex. 13:8, Deut 6:23 (Feinstein 69)⁴

There are certain problems with this rendition of the Hebrew that will be addressed in the next section. But

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first, on the general theme of memory, the third part of the puzzle is highlighted. For in this incredible chapter, we have an embedded theology of Jewish history and purpose. "I" am supposed to experience this ritual as if I had been there. Me and not my ancestors. In this ritual story-telling, the space time continuum ceases to

exist. The key events that formed the nation are remembered not as some long ago happening. The *matza* and bitter herbs are to stimulate the individual's personal memory of oppression and slavery. Discussing freedom as a philosophical idea or political commitment is not sufficient. The ritualized commemoration insists upon an immediate, embodied experience and celebration. And in that moment of personalizing history, of making it my own story, it becomes the source of a profound pledge to respond and be responsible. Jewish tradition builds on this personal sense of involvement to make the claim that Jews must eradicate the memory of slavery for ourselves and others. We must liberate the world, as we once experienced bondage and freedom. We must remember the evil of Amalek, so that we can continue to wipe it out. Our ancestors lived through these experiences and so must we. In the language of the Bible, the covenant is made with those who stood at Sinai "and also with those who are not here this day" (Deut. 29:14). Whether one accepts divine authority or the power of community or both, this outrageous claim is lived out in the ritual performance of Judaic celebrations.

Thus, paradoxically through ritual and recitation, memory is called upon to actually shatter historical time, to make present the past, and to make available a mode of experience that enriches and revitalizes a communal heritage.

Whose story; whose heritage?

Zakhor, remember! But whose story have we remembered, and who has been silenced. If memory is so important, if it forms the basis of identity and commitment and responsiveness, then which pieces of history have not been remembered, which have we neglected to commemorate with ritual, with celebration. Who has been left out?

Let us go back to that informative yet problematic paragraph: "In every generation...." There are two ways to

read it. One way is with all the masculine pronouns and nouns in place. In every generation a man—the Hebrew says Adam—must see himself as if he went out of Egypt, ... he must teach it to his sons, for God promised the land to his Fathers. Well surely, women went out too. Are daughters not included in the commandment to tell the story? They don't mean just the men—or do they? And who is they? The English translation stands, representing a tradition full of exclusively masculine terms, perpetuating the patriarchal vortex. What do our daughters and sisters think? Does this let them out of the loop of the obligation to remember and be re-membered? I hope not.

In order to fulfill the commandment to remember, the community of Jews must recognize and recall their female ancestors. Feminist Jews can successfully follow that traditional pattern of *Zakhor*, through personalizing the story, concretizing in symbolic ritual, and remembering the past sins of patriarchy while eliminating them.

1. Do not forget; blot out the memory. I take it that it is our task to destabilize the privileged reading of that text. Passover is a story of redemption that is meant for women, too. The Hebrew can imply or include women. We can read ancestors instead of Father as the word means both. We can read children and not sons, for the word means both. And Adam in Genesis I does mean person or human and not necessarily a man whose name is Adam. So it is not a history that is limited to *his* story. *Her* story is also embedded in it, and those who know the literature know that the rabbis claim it was because of the righteousness of the women that Israel was redeemed (Babylonian Talmud, Sota 11b).

Our challenge today is to name and proclaim the women while not implying that our ancestors were egalitarian. We cannot and should not erase the androcentrism; but we can read the ambiguities and expose the ruptures in the text. Women were a part of our history. We need to find a

way to name them and tell their story in ritual format. And while doing that we must avoid both victimization and aggrandizement.

2. Concretize in ritual. Ritual provides us with a map of religion in action. It enables individuals and communities to establish and maintain a relationship with that which they consider sacred. Religious ritual creates the arena in which the individual expresses solidarity with the group and the group manages to incorporate the individual. Feminist Jews today are exploring venues for ritual participation.

The univocality of the text can be overruled in story and ritual. Women are Jews linked in the cycle of memory and life that binds us all. But they have been left out of the specifics of story-telling and celebration. How do we remember Esther's great courage in facing foolish Ahasveros and evil Haman? How do we teach our daughters to celebrate her victory on behalf of our people? Is the popular focus on Mordecai the wise and Esther the beautiful appropriate? Are all her accomplishments linked to winning a beauty contest? Moreover, do we as feminists consecrate rebellion only by acclaiming Vashti, while denigrating Esther? In the opening segment of the story, Vashti is eliminated because of her forceful (just say no!) refusal to appear before the king's—her husband—male guests. But Esther too finds her cause and risks her life in defiance of male persecution. Is there only one voice to the text? Why not honour the talent of Esther who destabilizes the balance of power in that ancient kingdom? Why not commemorate her courage and insight as well as celebrating that of Vashti?

In many ways the texts are incomplete awaiting our telling and dancing. Feminist Jews have already begun to explore and exhibit great creativity in ritual. We all need to join in the task of proclaiming and celebrating the memory of our female ancestors. When we remember redemption, Miriam's dance should be repeated (Ex. 15:20). Miriam, sister to Moses, was one of the principal play-

ers in the chapter of our history known as the Exodus. When the Israelites escaped slavery, she led the women in dance and praise of God. Where are our dancer/leaders?

3. Personalize the story. The final paradox of ritualized memory is the ability to personalize the event and in so doing to render the experience timeless.⁵ It is a very difficult task. We hear the women's voices so sel-

Feminist scholars have been hard at work uncovering these records. For example, previously the world of women's prayers had been neglected and even denigrated. Chava Weissler (1987a; 1987b; 1991) undertook to reveal the religious significance of these personal petitions. The *skhines*, liturgical poems, proved to be a rich if difficult resource. Her essays help us to see that though women may not

sense of personal intimacy that I believe we must recapture.

There is one particular *skhine* that I find incredibly instructive. It was said by a woman as she put the Sabbath bread, *hallah*, into the oven. It is ritual in its simplest form. A straightforward plea to God about a most mundane matter. No special locus, movement, or articulation. No paraphernalia or qualifications. Just the woman, the bread, the oven, and God.

Lord of all the world, in your hand is all blessing. I come now to revere your holiness, and I pray you to bestow your blessing on the baked goods. Send an angel to guard the baking, so that all will be well baked, will rise nicely, and will not burn, to honor the holy Sabbath (which you have chosen so that Israel your children may rest thereon) and over which one recites the holy blessing—as you blessed the dough of Sarah and Rebecca our mothers. My Lord God, listen to my voice; you are the God who hears the voices of those who call to you

with the whole heart. May you be praised to eternity. (Weissler 1992a, 55)

This woman needs no intermediary or special *terra sancta*. Her kitchen is as worthy as any synagogue. More importantly, she is as worthy as any individual. She calls upon God as she needs. And her needs—as ordinary as baking—need no apology.

Looking carefully at the text, we can feel her presence. She is an ordinary woman, occupied with Sabbath preparations who expects God to participate in the enterprise.⁶ Her confidence is unmistakable; she has done her part and now God must work too. In fact, God is called upon to send his angel—who has nothing



Sue Goldstein, "Kristallnacht: 45 Years Later We Still Remember," 1993. Photograph from guerilla theatre in front of the German Consulate in Montreal on November 10th, 1993.

dom and they speak from a reality that is so far removed from ours. Identifying with them, saying "that could be me," becomes a major challenge.

The cumulative effect of the exclusion of women from history and from the public performance of ritual has left them invisible and us with the erroneous impression that they were not ritually active. There are numerous examples of women's rich participatory ritual life; of women as ritual experts, confident in their skill, authoritative in their position. It is our task to excavate the record, extract women's different ritual experience, and find the means of personal identification.

have been prayer leaders in the main synagogues, that is not the same as saying that they did not pray, create prayers, or lead other women in prayer. Women had no institutional formal role. They did have a religious life that was prayer based, over which they had control and which frequently led them to a female-centred form of worship. Their concerns were placed front and center. Whether in the home or synagogue women's section, they stood with God in the intimate circle of devotee.

Unlike the traditional liturgy, *skhines* are personalized and voluntary. They reveal great piety, knowledge of Jewish sources, and a striking intimacy with God. And it is that

better to do—to watch over the ovens. Her time is too precious. So having prepared the dough and placed it in the oven, she is no longer responsible. If it is burnt or does not rise properly, God or the angel are to blame. And all this in order to fulfill God's own commandment to honor the Sabbath. She stands firmly and directly in a covenantal relationship with God, who is involved with her world and her concerns. Accordingly, she implicates God in the kitchen aspect of Judaism. She privatizes and personalizes her communication with the sacred. She also does so in the name of Sarah and Rebecca. Her ritualized memory embraces female ancestors. Finally, and significantly, she tells God to listen to her voice! Ironically recalling that God tells Abraham to listen to the voice of Sarah (Genesis 21:12), while the *Talmud* proclaims that the voice of a woman is seductive (Berachot 24a; Kiddushin 70a).

It is obligatory on us to tell her story and to tell it as though we were there.

For this generation, perhaps more than any other before, we need to tell the story of women too. We need to be specific; we need to do more than assume or imply. We must make sure that our children know more than Deborah and Golda. We must proclaim and we must celebrate. Women have a song to sing, a story to tell, a dance to perform. *Zakhor*, remember the women too!

This is the edited version of a lecture first developed in Montreal for Women's Federation, Federation Combined Jewish Appeal in 1994, and then expanded and delivered in Toronto, at "Memory to Transformation" in January 1996.

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¹For an interesting exploration of the theological role of history see Cohen.

²This commandment to remember is based on the incident as described in Exod. 17:14-16, in which we are told that God will blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heaven.

³The shank bone, symbolic of the lamb.

⁴There are variations of this English translation, but they all maintain a male profile.

⁵For an interesting exploration of the personal meaning of ritual, see Lazaroff.

⁶This is a markedly different context than the *Mishnaic* one (pertaining to the *Mishna*, the first written compilation of the Oral Law) in which the text explains that a woman dies in childbirth if she has not been careful with the ritual of *hallah* preparation that is linked to a remembrance of temple worship (Mishna Sabbath 2:6). For a similar rift between the classical rabbinic emphasis and women's own view of an issue see Wasserfall; Weissler 1992b.

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Sue Goldstein: "I left New York. I left D.C. I'll be leaving Montréal soon. And if I move to Toronto, I'll leave there, too."