“It’s a Poor Sort of Memory that Only Works Backward.”
- Lewis Carroll

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“Some moments feel so important, we believe there is a perfect recording of them, etched in our minds.”

So begins actor Emma Stone’s voiceover of a new Netflix mini-series called “The Mind, Explained,” which tackles memory as the subject of its first episode.

“And yet,” explains neuroscientist Elizabeth Phelps, “Your memories… are probably not as accurate as you think. We know about 50% of the details of [a] memory change within a year, even though most people are convinced they’re 100% right.”

Human memory is not like a computer’s memory, where data gets stored and can be retrieved with absolute fidelity. A sermon

I wrote 20 years ago (when I first became a rabbi!) can be called up with a few keystrokes and there it is, word-for-word. But human memory is simultaneously much less accurate and much more complex. You would think that the purpose of memory is to preserve the past. But even our most significant memories, we learn—the ones that inform our life-story, our foundational identity—tend to warp and mutate over time. Memories are not perfect recordings. In fact, as far as recordings go, our memories are fairly unreliable.

Why?

Why does memory work this way—why do our brains twist the past while fooling us into thinking that we're remembering it exactly as it happened?

This seems a fitting inquiry as any for a service called *Yizkor* which comes from the Hebrew לזכור, "to remember." After all, we come here because of our memories. *Yizkor* matters because we recognize that memory gives us a certain power over death. So long as we remember, so long as we can replay in our minds a parent's embrace, a lover's caress, a child's first halting steps, a

sister's favorite recipe, a friend's laugh, then we possess some of their life-force, their essence, what we call in Hebrew the *neshama,* the breath or spirit of the human beings who once walked with us on life's journey.

And yet, what could it mean that our memories—no matter how vivid or three-dimensional they may feel, no matter how earnestly we might swear by their accuracy—have most likely shifted, deteriorated, and reassembled themselves over time?

A man named Henry Molaison, who went by his initials H.M., suffered from debilitating epileptic seizures following a childhood bicycle accident. In 1953, at the age of 31, he underwent a bilateral medial temporal lobectomy to resect parts of his brain in an attempt to cure his epilepsy. Although the surgery succeeded in controlling his seizures, it also produced a severe side effect. He became unable to form new memories. It was so severe, in fact, that it prevented him from navigating his own house or recognizing the faces of his own doctors.

His brain, which continued to be examined up until and well after his death in 2008, provided one of neuroscience's seminal

case studies in how human memory works. (In fact, you can even look up a scientific atlas of his brain, which was uploaded to the internet five years ago.)

H.M. demonstrated how different areas of the brain perform different memory-related tasks, with separate parts of the brain responsible for short-term memory, long-term memory, spatial memory, and motor skill learning.

My friend Lisa Faden and I met at Amherst College in 1991, when I was a freshman and she was a sophomore. I wish I could tell you how we met but, here, as with so many other details of our friendship, memory fails me. I do remember us bonding over a love of wordplay, and in particular a mutual appreciation for bad puns. It was I who pointed out to her that the phrase "in a nutshell" could, with the simple insertion of an apostrophe, now be read as "in a nut's hell," and the fact that she actually found this amusing, in a nutshell (or is it a nut's hell?) tells you pretty much everything you need to know about my taste in friends.

Memory does not fail me here: After college, when Lisa was teaching up in Newton and I was living in Providence, she came

down for a visit and I invited her to dinner on Federal Hill, Providence's Little Italy. After a hearty meal of pasta and gravy and gelato, we took a stroll around the neighborhood. It was a beautiful June evening and lots of pedestrians crowded the streets. Then, Lisa blurted out, "So, hey, I hear there's a big mafia presence in Providence, is that true?" I do *not* remember what happened next because I was too busy fumbling for the car keys and trying to get us into the car and speed off before she could say another word.

Lisa was the byproduct of a Japanese Buddhist Mother and an American Jewish father, and, after she married Rob, and they moved to Ontario where she got her Ph.D., and they had their children, a girl first and then a boy, Judaism again became an important part of her family's life—indeed, her spiritual anchor.

I remember that Lisa reached out to me as she became more involved in their lovely little Reform temple in London, Ontario, and soon decided to prepare for what she called her, "big, fat, 40-year old Bat Mitzvah."

And I remember the August day three years ago, when Lisa emailed to tell me she had been diagnosed out of the blue with metastatic breast cancer, which prompted her to begin a blog reflecting on life with cancer. But, mostly, it's a blog about life (with cancer).

Two years in, after surgery, chemo, radiation, and another surgery to remove the lesions from her brain where the cancer had metastasized, Lisa's daughter celebrated her own bat mitzvah. Lisa reflected in her blog:

"…I remember [not long after my diagnosis] going to a bat mitzvah and standing in the back, fortuitously next to a box of tissues. As the congregation went through the steps of a normal service, I remember crying the entire time. The girl at the front that day… was a cerebral petite blonde that I could easily see as a stand-in for [my daughter]. Knowing that I would be bat mitzvahed soon and my daughter would be someday, it was like we were all linked by an invisible chain. I was simultaneously watching my 5-year-old daughter, myself, and an amazing young woman.

Two weekends ago [our daughter] had her bat mitzvah.... The whole ceremony was a reminder about how the past, present, and future connect because you can't have a future without a present spent connecting to the past. Plus, you have young adults in the present reading from the past... so that they can carry their learning into the future. And when she read, she read from a Torah that was itself rescued from wartime Czechoslovakia" — just like the one we read at WRT this afternoon.

"...Go to a service, in any tradition," Lisa concludes, "and it is easy to think that there must be something more interesting and worthwhile to do than this. But is there, really?"[1]

Lisa died on Wednesday, June 19th, at the age of 47. Her children are 13 and 10. I last saw Lisa and Rob about 18 months before she died, over lunch at a cute little café called The Squirrel Cage, in Windsor, Ontario, a short distance from the Detroit area where we usually visit Kelly's family over winter break. Kelly had the good fortune to give Lisa, Rob and the kids a backstage tour of

[1] Published online on Lisa's blog, *Breathing in Breathing Out: Dum Spiro Spero,* https://breathinginbreathingout.blog/2019/05/24/can-you-see-yourself/, May 24, 2019.

Carousel on Broadway last summer when they came to visit New York while I was traveling in Israel.

Lisa now "belongs to eternity," to borrow a metaphor I sometimes use at funeral services.

But, to be honest, I prefer to say, "Now Lisa is committed to memory."

And here is where the story of the patient H.M. takes on special significance.

Because, as it turns out, when H.M. had a big chunk of his brain removed, he lost something more than his ability to form new memories. After his surgery, not only could H.M. not remember the past, he also struggled to answer questions about the future. He had no conception of "tomorrow."

The same part of his brain that stored memories of the past also seemed vital to imagining a future - the two are linked, the same way that Lisa's own Bat Mitzvah, and her daughter's Bat Mitzvah, and the old rescued Czech Torah scroll, and the ability to imagine a next generation's Bat Mitzvah were linked.

The Hebrew root for the verb remember, *Zayin - Kaf - Resh*, or *Zecher,* literally means, well, we're not exactly sure. It may mean "to point," like an arrow; or to pierce, or perforate; or bore down, as with a drill bit. The point, the amazing thing, is that a deep, Jewish understanding of memory synchronizes almost exactly with a scientific understanding of memory: that what memory really does is not so much preserve the past, word for word, image for image or note for note, but, rather, link the past, present, and future—a combination of remembering and imagining. Memory both drills down and points ahead.

Without memory—where we've been, with whom we've traveled life's journey, what we've discovered along the way—we cannot imagine where we're going. Without memory, we cannot realize who we must now become.

The Talmud tells us that God's memory is perfect. When we sounded the shofar on Rosh Ha-Shanah last week, we said, "There is no forgetfulness before the throne of Your glory."

But human memory, the kind of memory God gave *us,* is different. It is not perfect. It bends and breaks down over time.

Pieces drop away and new pieces get incorporated. Memory and imagination intertwine.

But in a way, human memory, the kind of memory we bring to this service of *Yizkor,* may be even better—because it helps us to move forward, we, the living, who have loved so many, so much, and who have had to let go.

No good comes from memorializing our loved ones in endless pain. Memory does not exist to keep us stuck in the past.

We gather up our memories, beautifully imperfect, and let them move us gently forward, to the next uncharted destination.