

What If We Are the Generation That Has to Remember?

Good Yontif.

The prophet Jeremiah once described what it feels like when violence suddenly breaks into ordinary life. He hears the alarms of war and, with destruction drawing near, cries out, “Disaster overtakes disaster... suddenly my tents are destroyed *B’rega*, in a moment.”

Jeremiah was speaking of a catastrophe in another time, but he understood something about how quickly the world we thought we knew can become unrecognizable. There are moments in history that divide our lives into a before and an after, moments when what had seemed certain becomes uncertain, and the world we thought we understood becomes something different.

Twenty-five years ago today, September 11th, 2001, became one of those before and after moments.

The airplanes were the same planes we had boarded without thinking. The buildings were workplaces. People had gotten up on that ordinary morning, kissed someone goodbye, hurried to work, bought coffee, made plans for dinner.

And then, *b’rega*—instantaneously—the ordinary became unimaginable.

Those of us who lived through that morning remember turning on the television and trying to understand what we were seeing. We remember the towers falling, the smoke rising over Manhattan, the Pentagon burning, that field in Pennsylvania. We remember reaching for the telephone, wanting to hear the voices of the people we loved. And we remember that terrible realization that something had happened from which there would be no simple return.

The world changed on September 11th.

Travel changed. Security changed. Nations went to war. Governments rewrote policies. Technologies once extraordinary became part of ordinary life.

Twenty-five years later, there is no question that the world changed.

But has humanity?

I have been thinking about that question because the High Holy Days ask us to think about change, about examining who we have been and asking who we might yet become.

And perhaps it is not enough to ask how the world has changed. Perhaps we need to ask whether we have too.

Because September 11th was certainly not the first time hatred convinced human beings that the lives of others mattered less than their own.

Our own history knows that story all too well.

On November 9th and 10th, 1938, Nazi leaders unleashed what came to be known as *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass. More than fourteen hundred synagogues were burned. Thousands of Jewish-owned businesses and homes were vandalized. Jews were beaten and killed, rounded up and imprisoned in concentration camps simply because they were Jews.

But by the time the glass shattered, the conditions that made such violence possible had already been forming.

For years, Jews had been gradually pushed out of German society. Their rights were stripped away. They were forced from professions, excluded from schools and institutions, portrayed as subhuman, and blamed for the suffering of the society around them. The Holocaust did not begin with the gas chambers at Auschwitz.

And we have to be careful with the retelling of history. Not every prejudice is another Holocaust, and not every injustice is another *Kristallnacht*. The *Shoah* is too important to turn into a metaphor for every moment we fear or oppose. But that does not mean we stop asking what history can teach us. It means learning from it carefully enough to recognize patterns without pretending the circumstances are the same.

Because if remembering the Holocaust means anything, surely it means learning something from the path that led there. One of those lessons is that enormous acts of evil are often preceded by acts of dehumanization—by learning to look at another person and see only a category, a problem, a threat, an enemy ... one of “them.” Once another human being has become a “them,” their suffering becomes easier to dismiss, and things that once would have been unthinkable can begin to seem acceptable.

Perhaps that is one reason Judaism is so insistent about remembering.

Again and again Torah tells us, *Zachor*—remember. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. Remember where you came from. Remember the suffering.

Judaism has never understood memory as simply preserving the past. In Torah, memory carries an obligation. We are told that because we were strangers in Egypt, we must not oppress the stranger. Our experience of powerlessness is meant to shape the way we respond when someone else is vulnerable.

That is what makes Jewish memory different from nostalgia. It does not ask us only to look backward. It asks what remembering requires of us now.

And that question carries a particular urgency today, because the responsibility for carrying memory is passing to us.

For generations, the Holocaust has existed within living memory. Survivors could walk into our synagogues and schools and say, “I was there.” They could tell our children about the house they left behind, the school they were no longer permitted to attend, the mother or father they never saw again. They could roll up a sleeve and show a number tattooed into an arm.

The generation of survivors is diminishing rapidly. Every year, fewer people remain who can say, "I remember."

The responsibility is already shifting.

And increasingly, the words will no longer be only "I remember." They will have to become: "We remember."

And then there is October 7th, 2023.

There are some dates that do not remain dates. They enter us.

October 7th is one of them.

For so many Jews, something changed that morning that is difficult to put into words. It was not only the horror of people murdered in their homes, young people hunted down at a music festival, children and grandparents dragged across a border and taken hostage.

It was the shattering of something we had allowed ourselves to believe.

That whatever dangers exist in the world, there were certain images that belonged to Jewish history. Certain stories we had inherited from our parents and grandparents, certain fears we carried because generations before us had lived them—but which we had somehow come to believe belonged to another time.

And suddenly, they did not.

Something ancient and terrible moved from memory into the present tense.

For many of us, October 7th reached someplace deeper than fear. It touched that place in the Jewish soul that knows what it means to wonder whether the world is safe for us, whether people will care when Jewish lives are taken, whether the hatred we thought history had exposed can ever truly disappear.

We did not simply learn what happened on October 7th.

We felt it.

And we are still carrying it.

For many of us, September 11th is still lived memory. But for an entire generation, it is history. Those born in the 21st century know what happened because they have been taught about it. They have seen photographs and watched footage, but they cannot know the confusion of that morning or the moment when we understood that the first plane had not been an accident. They cannot know the silence in the skies afterward, or what it felt like to realize that the world had forever changed.

That is how quickly lived memory begins to become inherited memory.

And one day October 7th, too, will be told to people who were not there—people who will know the date, see the photographs, hear the stories, but will not remember what it felt like to live through that day.

So perhaps we need to tell ourselves:

We are now the generation that has to remember.

Remembering cannot simply mean preserving the stories of what happened. It has to mean learning to recognize what those stories are trying to teach us.

In her book, *White. Blonde. Jew.*, Alyssa Rosenheck offers a warning about the way the darkest forces in history endure. She writes:

“History’s evils do not linger because they are forgotten; they remain because we fail to see their shape in the present. The forces that seek to erase our values, morality, ethics, and meaning do not vanish with time. They adapt. They camouflage. They wait for the world to look away. But being human means we do not look away.”

That is the real test of memory.

It is easy to recognize hatred, cruelty, and dehumanization once history has named them for us. The harder task is to recognize their shape while we are still living inside the present—before we know how the story ends.

Our rabbis understood that memory becomes sacred only when it teaches us something about the value of a human life.

There is a remarkable passage in the Mishnah, in tractate Sanhedrin, in which the rabbis ask why God created humanity from a single human being.

God could have created an entire village at once. God could have begun with different peoples in different places.

Instead, Torah begins the human story with Adam.

The rabbis say that one reason Adam was created alone was for the sake of peace among human beings, so that no one could ever say to another, “My ancestor is greater than yours.”

Before there were nations, before there were borders, before there were religions dividing one community from another, there was simply a human being.

And from that teaching the rabbis draw another conclusion: the destruction of a single life is like the destruction of an entire world.

Because no person is only one person.

Every one of us carries relationships and memories and possibilities. Every person is someone’s child, someone’s parent, someone’s friend. Every human being carries stories that no one else can tell in quite the same way and possibilities that have not happened yet.

Nearly three thousand people murdered on September 11th were not simply a number.

They were worlds.

Six million Jews murdered in the Shoah were six million worlds.

And the approximately 1,200 people killed in the October 7th attacks were worlds, too.

Their stories are now handed to us.

In the book of Joshua, after the Israelites cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land, Joshua tells them to take twelve stones from the river and place them where future generations will see them. But the stones are not there simply to mark the place where something happened.

Joshua imagines a day when children who were not there will look at those stones and ask their parents, "What do these stones mean?"

Notice the question.

Not simply, "What happened here?"

But, "What do these stones mean?"

Facts can be preserved in books. Dates can be written on monuments. Names can be carved into stone. But memory survives only when one generation is willing to tell the next generation why those facts, those dates, and those names should matter.

Deuteronomy 32:7 says, "Remember the days of old; consider the years of generations past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders and they will explain it to you."

That is the responsibility being handed us. Not simply to preserve the stones, but to be able to answer when someone asks what they mean. Those who come after us will increasingly know these events through what we choose to preserve and what we teach.

So let this be our charge as we enter this new year:

Learn from what we remember.

When another human being is reduced to a label, refuse it.

When history begins to whisper that we have seen something like this before, pay attention.

We can refuse to accept as inevitable what history has already shown us to be dangerous.

Twenty-five years ago, b'rega, in a moment, our world changed.

Twenty-five years later, the shofar calls us to decide what we will carry forward from what we have seen, what we have learned, and what we refuse to forget.

Perhaps that is what it means to become the generation that has to remember: not simply to keep the past alive, but to allow the past to keep our conscience alive.

Ken yehi ratzon. May it be so.