

Early this summer I received an email from a woman named Amanda, who began her letter, “I’m not sure if you remember my family ... My mother, Keryl, passed away when I was born.” How could I not remember? It was 21 years ago. I had only been a rabbi a couple of years. I did not know Keryl and her husband, Scott, very well, but our paths had crossed. Then, one night, a little after midnight the phone rang. “Rabbi, Keryl just gave birth. The baby’s fine, but there have been some complications. Please, can you come ... now?” It was a difficult drive to the hospital in downtown Chicago. By the time I arrived Keryl was on life-support. She did not survive the night. The baby’s name ... was Amanda.

“I’m not sure if you remember.” How could I not recall that night ... and the days that followed? How often these days does a healthy woman in her early 30s die in childbirth? Her funeral was probably the largest at which I have ever officiated. I remember ... all too well. I remember Keryl. And I remember, even then, worrying about the burden of the baby who would someday know that in giving her life, her mother died.

By chance, I was in Chicago a few days after Amanda wrote. We agreed to meet. When Anne and I sat with her, she told us “We don’t talk about my mom very much.” She understood why, but she was eager to learn more. Amanda knew of her mother’s active involvement in the Jewish community. She said that she was similarly drawn to Jewish service. Her goal is to enter the Hebrew Union College next year in order to become a Jewish educator. After our meeting Amanda wrote hoping I still had her mother’s eulogy. I was honored to share it ... and reading it brought back vivid memories.

“I’m not sure if you remember.” Is it my memory Amanda was trying to jog, or was she really saying, “I’m not sure if *I* remember?” Bereft of her own memory, she sought it from anyone who might be able to give it.

I’ve been thinking a lot about Amanda over these past couple of months, wondering why, sometimes, we yearn for memories and at other times, we only wish we could forget. Particularly now, joined together in communal remembering, all these varied feelings jumble together.

“Remembering you is a painful joy.”

“I’m not sure if I remember.”

“If only I could forget.”

“I can’t recollect anymore what he smelled like.”

“It hurts to bring it all back.”

Remembering and forgetting, forgetting and remembering - at *Yizkor* they are like waves that wash sand from one part of the beach, only to be deposited somewhere else. At one and the same time we yearn to remember every detail, yet keep at bay the pain that comes with even pleasant recollections.

Remembering and forgetting. For some, it is the longing of not knowing what a loved one might have been like. What would my mother think of her grandchildren? I left so much unsaid with my sister, but now she’s gone. How I wish I could share this place - or this moment - with my wife, my partner, my husband. For others, like Amanda, memory is as ephemeral as the morning fog on a warm summer morn. They yearn for memories that can bring rootedness and meaning. And for some memory is too painful, so they seek relief in whatever might dull the mind.

In the movie *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the main characters, played by Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet, live in the near future, a time when it is possible to go to have specific memories erased. Former lovers, they find that remembering the time they were together is just too painful. Unable to bear the sadness of their separation, they undergo a therapy to erase all traces of being together.

The movie’s title comes from Alexander Pope’s poem “Eloisa to Abelard”, in which forgetfulness is praised as the “eternal sunshine of the spotless mind.” For any of us who have suffered through the dredged up recollections of painful moments, it is easy to understand the wistful hope that we might be blessed with forgetting. Indeed, one of the characters in the movie, reflecting on the pain of remembering, quotes Nietzsche, saying, “Blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their blunders.”

To completely erase a memory seems the stuff of fiction or fantasy. But recent scientific studies seem to hint that it may be possible.¹ A memory, scientists have found, creates kind of protein “bridge” in our brain, linking the event to emotions, thoughts and various senses. Some researchers have found that certain drugs, administered at the very moment when someone is recalling something, can not only inhibit, but erase that specific memory. Perhaps, it seems, we will be able to rid ourselves of memory.

Now here is where the implications of all this research starts to get really weird. Since we can end a memory as it is being recalled, what this implies is that a memory is not stored anywhere in our brain. Memory is not like going into a file cabinet or googling something we recall. Memory, it seems, is more like imagination. In essence, every time we remember something we are re-creating it. As a result of working with amnesia patients, Israeli scientist Yadin Dudai, suggests that the memories that are the most secure are actually those that are used the least. The more we remember, in other words, the less connected the memory becomes to the actual event and the more to our own way that we remember.

Memory, it seems, is what we make it.

In Jewish tradition, memory is not simply an act of recollection. We do not just tell the story of the Exodus at the *seder*, but reenact it as if we ourselves went out of Egypt. Even many thousands of years later we are commanded to blot out the name of Amalek, the archetype of evil - do not forget. And we remember our loved ones in a communal setting five times during the year - once on the *yahrzeit* (the anniversary of a loved ones death) and four times at *Yizkor*.

If memory brings such pain, why does Jewish tradition have us do it so often? Surely ours is not a faith eager to see us hurt. So why do we continue seek to remember? Perhaps the reason has to do with what the current research is finding out about memory. It is not simply to retrieve information - even as emotional as that information can be - but to engage us in an act of re-creation.

¹ Radiolab “Memory and Forgetting” (January 25, 2008),
<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/radiolab/episodes/2008/01/25>

When we remember, we bring to life all that was. At times, that brings pain, but more often than not our memories transport us to a beloved time. We recall the smell of a grandmother's brisket or father's perfume. Thinking of a departed sister we are brought back to shared secrets as teens, of a departed brother playing baseball on the street. At times like this, when we join in shared, sacred recollection it all comes back so vividly. It is created anew - and so is not lost.

I'm not sure if you remember.
But I do
I do remember ... and all too well.
I close my eyes and you are there.
At times the smell of you almost disappears.
Is that your voice?
I don't recall.
And then it all returns
Wave upon wave
I'm not sure if I remember.
But I do.
I do remember.
At *Yizkor* we all recall.
Memory fills up every nock and cranny.
Shoulder to shoulder ... or sitting alone
I do remember ... we all do.
Like Jonah running from God
I sometimes seek to run from the pain
But even in the depths You are there, O God
So are the ones I recall.
I cannot hide
And so I seek.
I'm not sure if I remember.
But I do.
And now, recalling, I pray
Let these memories not disappear.
Please, O One who remembers all
Let me keep my memories
May they ennoble me and enrich me.
I'm not sure if you remember.
Now, O God, I do.
I remember.
With tears of pain and tears of gratitude,
I remember.