

In his short story, *Funes the Memorius*, Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges tells the story of a man with a terrible and unusual disability. Funes has a horseback riding accident that leaves him changed. Instead of forgetting, however, Funes is left remembering everything. We normally consider memory loss an awful consequence of brain injury. Borges forces us to imagine the exact opposite scenario - the burden of recalling too much.

After his accident Funes perceives and remembers everything in detail. While many of us might be jealous of a person with a photographic memory, Borges describes the overwhelming weightiness of a memory that cannot separate the meaningful from the meaningless, the insignificant from the important, what is weighty from what is worthless. The fictional Borges describes the ability of Funes in this way:

With one quick look, you and I perceive three wine glasses on a table; Funes perceived every grape that had been pressed into the wine ... He knew the forms of the clouds in the southern sky on the morning of April 30, 1882 ...

He was able to reconstruct every dream, every daydream he had ever had. Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day ... but each reconstruction had itself taken an entire day. 'I, myself, alone, have more memories than all mankind since the world began' ... And also ... 'My memory, sir, is like a garbage heap.'

In the seventeenth century Locke postulated ... (that) each individual thing - every stone, every bird, every branch - would have its own name. Funes (insisted that was) ... too general. Funes remembered not only every leaf of every tree in every patch of forest, but every time he had perceived or imagined that leaf.

The importance of remembering is deeply woven into the fabric of Jewish life and tradition. God tells Noah - and by extension all humankind, "Remember my covenant, which is between me and you." (Genesis 9:15) At Sinai we are told to "Remember the Sabbath day." (Exodus 20:8) Elsewhere in the Torah we are commanded "remember and do all (God's) commandments." (Numbers 15:40) and to "remember" that we were slaves in Egypt. (Deuteronomy 5:15; 24:18) When Moses gives his final speech to the people of Israel before his death he says to them, "Remember the days of old. Consider the years of ages past." (Deuteronomy 32:7) It is a religious imperative to remember how our enemy Amalek tried to destroy us - and how we must not forget. (Deuteronomy 25:17)

Last November a group of congregants joined Anne and me on a trip to Central Europe. Although we witnessed the renewal of Jewish life, we could not help but be

moved by so much that was lost. At Auschwitz memories rose like an autumn fog, of loved ones not seen for decades, yet whose lives were still fresh in the mind and heart. “We will not forget!” we promised in the prayers we offered.

We all know what it is to lose memory. As much as we joke about the forgetfulness that comes with aging, the humor is tinged with the terror of really losing our memory. How painful it is to see someone with Alzheimer’s - and to witness the loss of connection that comes with it. Without memory what are we? I remember the ache of seeing my mother, who was not sure who her grandchildren were ... and sometimes was not sure who her sons were either. Our prayer is that we do remember, then ... for only with memory do our lives have a context. Indeed, if I cannot remember who I am - what am I?

At this sacred moment of *yizkor* the need to remember takes on an added poignancy. We know that memory so often eludes us. With time it becomes harder to recall the smell or touch or voice of loved one. So, what we seek in coming here is a chance to fulfill the commandment not to forget, the human urge to remember. And here, now, surrounded by so many who also yearn to recall the intimate details of lives now gone, the memories flood back.

As painful as the remembering can be, most of us welcome it. We give thanks for the memory of parents; no matter how old we are - still yearning for their protective love. We cry grateful tears for a spouse or partner or friend who cared for us, who knew us, who challenged us. A small number of us have hearts that ache with the memory of children, whose lives were like a dream, taken before all their dreams were fulfilled. Our plea at *yizkor* is not only that we remember, in fact, but that God will, too:

יְזַכֵּר אֱלֹהִים נְשֵׁמוֹת יְקָרֵי “God, remember for ever my dear ones ...”

So imbedded is the importance of memory in Jewish life that we forget that as damaging as can be too little memory, so can be too much. Funes the Memorious was paralyzed by his memory. Because he could not forget anything, he could not move. And he lay in his bed for the rest of his life. Borges offers us, therefore, a cautionary tale about memory. As important as it is to remember - we can remember too much, too vividly, too often ... and when we do we are paralyzed, unable to move out of the past and into the present.

I have met people who, even years after a loved ones death, still feel overwhelmed by grief. But it is not only these memories that debilitate us. On Yom Kippur we all confront

the wrongs we have committed. Memories of what we have done - our regret and remorse, the hurt we caused - are essential if a true change of behavior is to take place. We should not forget our wrongs ... or those done to us. How else do we gain a sense of self-respect? When we forget too much we cannot help but hurt those we love. But too many memories can also be yoke. Rabbi Avi Weiss says, "Sometimes relationships can only go on if we can forget past slights. Sometimes a marriage can only endure if we forget how we have been wronged. Sometimes it is important to forget our children's mistakes, and they our mistakes." (New York Board of Rabbis, Sermon Seminar 5769, September 3, 2008)

How do we remember in a way that is neither too little nor too much? There is no certain way forward, no stock formula, but our tradition does offer guidance. The prophet Jeremiah, who spoke of the people of Israel's betrayal of God, says that God spoke in the "ears of Jerusalem: 'I remember the devotion of your youth.'" (Jeremiah 2:2) In other words, God - who could remember everything - chooses not to. Instead of focusing on the pain, God remembers the love.

That selective memory - remembering what has to be recalled, but not letting it paralyze us from living with a sense of possibility for the present and hope for the future - is the kind of memory we seek at *yizkor* and on Yom Kippur. This is not a time to be debilitated by memory, but renewed by it. This is not a day to allow memory to crush us with a feeling of unworthiness, but a day to use memory to move from transgression toward the healing of forgiveness.

At *yizkor*, then, let us remember ... but just enough. Rabbi Milton Steinberg, one of the great congregational rabbis of the mid-twentieth century, died at a too young age of 46. After a near-fatal heart attack a few years before his death, he wrote, "Nothing can be more grotesque and more undignified than a futile attempt to hold on ... One must not hold life too precious. One must always be prepared to let it go." (Sermon "To Hold With Open Arms")

Memory is a blessing. In proper proportion it is the gift that makes us human. It is what enables us to know we have erred - and better ourselves. But too much memory can paralyze us, holding us so tightly that as we hold on to it and it to us that we cannot live.

Let us remember, then, as God does. Selectively. Wisely. Let us remember the pain, the loss, the empty space ... but remember in order to live.