How to Remember - T'tzavveh 5783

My fifth graders often ask me about the historical accuracy of the stories we are learning about from the Tanakh, the bible. Did the walls of Jericho really come down? Was David definitely a king of Israel? Did the Israelites really leave Egypt? I try to answer them honestly. Much of the time, we do not know. Sometimes we do– there really was a King David, most likely. And sometimes we know something did not happen– most of the Joshua stories, for example, are probably fabrications. But often, we just don't know.

After that is when the conversation gets interesting. So what? I ask. Does it matter? Why? Does the impact of the stories change if they did or didn't happen?

Then we talk about stories that have changed their lives, stories that showed them something true about humanity, even if the stories were fiction. The Bible can sometimes do the same thing.

In Judaism, history and memory aren't always the same thing. History is the empirical description of what has happened– memory is the meaning we attach to it. Stories can tell us who we are, even stories that aren't historical accounts.

The German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus wanted to understand how memory works, so he did an experiment on himself. He gave himself lists of random syllables, and went about memorizing them. He would read through the list, stopping himself when he made a mistake, and go back to the beginning. After set periods of time, he would return to recite his list, and evaluate how much he could remember.

He found that after a short period of time, memory drops significantly. Most things that we remember stay in our minds for only a short amount of time, but there are things we can do to help ourselves remember specific things if we so choose. The more we repeat something, not just at one particular time, but repeatedly, over time, the more likely we are to embed that memory in our brains. In fact, neuroscience has since shown that even *trying* to remember something helps widen the neural pathways that help us

remember that fact, and make it more likely that we will be able to remember it again next time.

So the question for us is, then, what are the things that are important enough to us that they are worth making an effort to remember them?
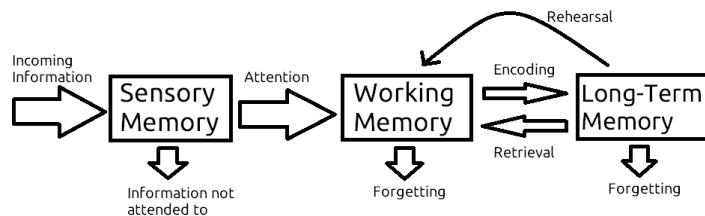
This Shabbat is called Shabbat Zakhor, the Shabbat of memory. We are commanded to remember Amalek, the group of people that is described in this week's maftir reading as preying on the vulnerable and exploiting their weaknesses. Amalek represents not just the particular people that attacked the Israelites in the desert, but also has come to represent a type of behavior.

The Torah tells us that Amalek attacked Israel from behind. It says, "Amalek surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear." Nehama Leibowitz points out that the Torah specifically calls out Amalek for lacking fear of God, a trait which is considered to be part of being an upright person, regardless of whether one is Israelite or not. What made Amalek's behavior reprehensible was that they weren't concerned about what was right, but only about winning.

The Amalek story starts with what could have been a historical occurrence, but it became so much more than that. Does it matter if the people who are associated with Amalek, including Haman, really had ancestors who were desert dwellers who attacked a group of Israelites in the desert? If Amalek were an actual group of people who we could identify, then yes, it would matter if we were continuing to vilify them. That would be a problem. But instead, when we talk about Amalek today, we aren't talking about an ethnicity, or about a group of people. We are talking about a pattern of behavior. And that pattern of behavior isn't just found among people who attack Jews. As Rabbi Ethan Tucker wrote this week, we can find Amalek-like behavior even among Jews, even among Jews who believe themselves to be acting in the interests of the Jewish people.

Amalek has become a symbol, a symbol of the importance of challenging anyone who would take advantage of others, or who would harm others simply for being different. Amalek is a reminder of the importance to us of having "fear of God," of acting out of care for those around us. And so, when we remember Amalek, we aren't concerned with the past as much as with the present and future– we are reminding ourselves of

who we want to be, that we want to be the type of people who stand up for ourselves and for people around us.

Some siddurim preserve a tradition of having 6 remembrances to reflect on every day. These remembrances list stories from the Torah, incidences from the Jewish collective memory, which say something not just about what happened to us, but about who we are today, and the legacy we want to pass down to future generations.

The first remembrance is the Exodus from Egypt. We are called upon to remember that we were slaves, but it doesn't stop there. This memory has a message, one that the Torah repeats over and over again: You were strangers in Egypt, so you must love the stranger. We remember Egypt as a reminder to have empathy for anyone who is vulnerable.

Next we remember Sinai. We remember that we are partners in a covenant, a covenant that says that we have obligations to God, to those around us, and to ourselves. At the core of our collective consciousness are ethics and moral responsibilities. Sinai reminds us that we don't have responsibilities only to ourselves and to our own needs, but also to our community, to humanity, and to the world around us.

Next of course is Amalek, a reminder of the importance of standing up against those who would victimize the vulnerable.

The fourth remembrance is of the Golden Calf. Not even 40 days after the Israelites literally heard God's voice telling them how to live, they already lacked faith, and looked around for a god that would be more concrete and easier to understand. If they could make such a mistake, how much more could we, who perhaps have not had experiences of such certainty. The Golden Calf story reminds us how easy it is neglect our ethical or religious obligations, but also reminds us that there are second chances in life. Moses prayed for forgiveness for the Jewish people, and God granted it. It reminds us that we can always continue to try again.

The fifth of the 6 remembrances is what happened to Miriam when she said unkind words about her brother Moses. Even Miriam, an actual prophet, was punished for

speaking unkindly. Her story reminds us of the importance of weighing our words, and speaking with kindness.

And the 6th and final remembrance is Shabbat, a core part of the experience of being Jewish.

Yehuda Kurtzer, the president of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, talks about the importance of memory when it comes to our Jewish identity. He writes about how in our tradition, memory isn't necessarily about something that empirically happened. After all, many of the biblical stories happened so long ago that we have no idea whether they are historically accurate, and many of those stories are written in ways that suggest that they are meant more metaphorically than literally. However, they are part of our cultural memory. And as such, those stories tell us something about who we are. They tell us that being Jewish means to love the stranger, to stand up against bigotry, to have responsibilities to those other than ourselves, and so much more.

We draw on the past to construct meaning for the present and future. To the extent that it is possible, we have a responsibility to differentiate between fact and fiction, and to understand the complex dynamics present in any particular situation. But the mythic tales from our past are often not truly about our past at all. They are about our values, about who we strive to be, and about the future that we hope to create together. That's the message I try to give our fifth graders, and that is a message that all of us can take to heart as well.

Shabbat Shalom.