

FOLD: Building Memory

Ari Yovel, 12/9/19

During one of my very first classes at Mills just over three years ago, history professor Bert Gordon told our class something that has delighted, haunted, and challenged me every day since: “history is the study of humanity’s perception of itself.” What are our histories-- individual, communal, generational-- if not the sum total of our shared memories, a haphazard collection of narratives woven together into something larger and more beautiful than any single part? We pick up the stories that were given to us, run with them a short while, and pass them on to those who follow, having made them a bit richer and more complicated by having had it in our possession-- if only for a short while.

As a lifelong out-and-proud Jew, much of my life revolves around the ongoing sanctification, enrichment, and exploration of memory. We remember G-d’s ongoing presence by blessing mundane miracles-- food and drink, the beauty of nature, the wonders of our own bodies, and this memory is an experience. We remember our commitment to healing and bettering the world as we honor the mitzvot in our words and needs, and this memory is a responsibility. We remember our covenant with G-d in the welcoming of new babies, the fragility of life and stability in broken glasses at weddings, and our beloved ancestors in the recitation of Kaddish prayers each year-- all of these memories are an inheritance.

However, I also embody a very different relationship with memory than many others, Jewish or otherwise, through my existence as a disabled person with memory issues. It is far harder to conceive of preserving such lofty ideas when the everyday struggles of existence are already so much for my brain to handle. How can I reasonably expect myself to remember to be mindful, offer gratitude, and be cognizant of my place in the great ongoing chain of Jewish existence when on most days it’s a struggle just to remember where I put my keys or that I have to answer that email or that I need to eat regularly? That kind of executive function, which I experience as an ongoing facet of my existence, is at best irritating and at worst can be actively dangerous.

It is hard not to feel like a failure: like somehow, this aspect of my disabled life makes me “bad” at being Jewish. At times, my brain feeds me a story that sounds much like that, and misleads me into believing that the pearl beyond price of inherited Jewish memory was wasted on a mind like mine. It is at those moments that those same memories matter most. I recall the words of Professor Gordon-- “history is the study of humanity’s perception of itself”-- and I consider the ways in which I evaluate my place in the larger context of Jewish life and memory. It is small, and yet it is. It takes work, and that effort gives it value. It is an ongoing struggle, and as I am part of the People of Israel, which means “who struggle with G-d and humanity and prevail”-- that makes it the most Jewish thing of all.

This winter season, Jews all over the world will recall the struggles of the Maccabees, who fought in mind and body to preserve the spirit of the Jewish people under Greek occupation. We will offer gratitude for this opportunity to remember their struggles, for a G-d who performed miracles “in those days and in our time”, and for the privilege of helping protect and nurture the shared memory of our people. This year, I will take that opportunity to thank myself for the gift of my struggle with memory. It is an experience I will embody, it is a responsibility I will shoulder, it is an inheritance I will cherish. Most of all, however- it is an opportunity to honor the act of remembering and building memory as a miracle all its own.