

Witnessing History: Our Sacred Task as Primary Sources

Our modern conception of Jewish history is profoundly shaped by a belief that our experiences matter. What we see, what we feel, how the events of the world are metabolized by our Jewish souls and selves - not only are these observations essential to our self-understanding, they, alongside Torah, are the record from which our descendants will take counsel. We are all primary sources.

It wasn't always this way, though.

Centuries ago, a poet-philosopher named Moses Ibn Ezra had a bone to pick with the Jewish People. He accused prior generations of "indolence" and "sin" in the neglect of writing history. "Behold...all other nations have exerted themselves to write their histories and excel in them," he complained.¹ Ibn Ezra is unique in critiquing Jewish historical inattention until four centuries later when historian Solomon Ibn Verga expresses envy at the Christian custom of reading historical chronicles in order to take counsel from them.²

Dr. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, the towering historian who unearthed these criticisms, devoted a lifetime of study to the tension between collective memory and historical facts. In his crucial work of Jewish historiography, *Zachor*, Yerushalmi poses the logical question: Aren't we the People commanded to remember? The verb *lizkor* - to remember - appears in the Tanakh no fewer than 169 times.³ And yet, between the destruction of the Second Temple in the first century and the Spanish Expulsion in the fifteenth, Jewish historical writing disappears.⁴ Yerushalmi contends that for the rabbis, there was one primary task in the interval between cycles of destruction and redemption: to become a holy people. He shaped modern Jewish scholarship, in part, by dusting off and consecrating those very records kept in the intervals between destruction and redemption, not by prophets or kings, but by witnesses and survivors

¹ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 33.

² Ibid., 33-4.

³ Ibid., 5.

⁴ Ibid., 16.

and storytellers.

By the sixteenth century Jewish chroniclers believed something unprecedented had taken place. The Iberian expulsion had “altered the face of Jewry and of history itself.”⁵ This calamity could not be folded into the paradigmatic narrative of enslaved Israelites yearning for deliverance. The tears of our bereft foremothers did not encompass their pain. What this Jewish generation lost, their deracination and their suffering, warranted new words. And so, they expanded the work of becoming a holy people and broadened the meaning of *lizkor*. Alongside remembering their ancient past and finding meaning in that memory, the Jewish People would now write their history as it transpired.

The robust and flourishing academic discipline of Jewish history and civilization, in which I majored as an undergraduate and graduate student, was born out of the recognition that Jewish voices count. The centrality of Torah is not threatened by the inclusion of contemporary perspective. On the contrary, its holiness is further pronounced by the unfurling dialogue between ancient prophecy and lived reality.

Consider how the reflections of adolescent Anne Frank in her secret annex have influenced Holocaust studies. “To be honest,” she writes on May 20, 1944, less than three months before her family’s discovery and arrest by the German police,

I can’t understand how the Dutch, a nation of good, honest, upright people, can sit in judgment on us the way they do...

I have only one hope: that this anti-Semitism is just a passing thing, that the Dutch will show their true colors, that they’ll never waver from what they know in their hearts to be just, for this is unjust!

And if they ever carry out this terrible threat.... We too will have to shoulder our bundles and move on, away from this beautiful country, which once so kindly took us in and now turns its back on us.

I love Holland. Once I hoped it would become a fatherland to me, since I had lost my own. And I hope so still!⁶

⁵ Ibid., 59.

⁶ Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler, eds., Susan Massotty, trans. (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 303.

Anne's voice, so unvarnished and hope-filled even after twenty-two months in hiding, captures the depth of her need to believe in the righteousness of her Dutch compatriots. Even as she learns about the spread of anti-Semitism in Holland, she clings with hope to her memory of being welcomed as a five-year-old refugee from Germany. With every stroke of her pen, Anne forced her humanity into this violent chapter of Jewish suffering. Against the forces bent on reducing Jewish life to numbers and statistics and oblivion, Anne grafted herself, in all her complexity, onto history's record.

The same happened in the nascent state of Israel during the Yom Kippur War where *Haaretz Shelanu*, a children's weekly, published letters from their young readers. The October 22, 1973 edition shares the paralyzing fear of Anat Gavrieli from Tel Aviv: "Dear editor, I know there is a war. The Egyptians surprised us and ambushed us. I feel uneasy. There are real sirens. Instead of going down to the shelter, I stay at home, seized with fear. . . . I am glued to the radio like a snail to its shell. I hope and pray that there will be peace...."⁷ Ten-year-old Liora Binyamin of Haifa pens her note in fury, "[They] are cowards! We are not! ...Our victory is assured, because our fight is a fight for life."⁸ And eleven-year-old Ronit Hagai from Ramat Gan wondered: "Maybe most of the Arabs did not want to fight, and it was only the leaders who incited them?"⁹

Haaretz Shelanu was prescient enough to see their budding readers as reflective of their state. The candid expressions of fear, hope, and indignation helped personify the feelings of a young nation at war. Their questions conveyed the grappling of a people yearning for coexistence with their neighbors. These young Israelis boldly accepted the invitation to register a glimpse of their wartime lives in the public record. In doing so, they expanded the aperture through which the history of the Yom Kippur War would be captured and understood.

In our own backyard, the 9/11 Memorial and Museum is a living tribute and archive of the objects and testimonies from the worst terror attacks in American history. It's a sacred, secular site imbued by the holiness of memory. Memory of a blue-skied morning ripped open by hate that wrenched 2,977 universes from us, five belonging to

⁷ Iorem Melcer, "[The Children of '73 Write About the Yom Kippur War](#)," *The National Library of Israel*, 14 Sept 2020 [accessed 23 Aug 2024]

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Rodeph Sholom.¹⁰ This site was built because of the shared belief that the cataclysm we witnessed had altered the face of America and of history itself. Ordinary citizens, living through unprecedented times, became primary sources.

Nobody asks to live through war or to work on a high floor in a demolished building. As we danced with our Torah scrolls on Simchat Torah last year, we had no idea how quickly our joy would transmute into sorrow. Witnessing the convulsions of history is a burden, and we know from our grandparents and our veterans and our firefighters that the torment inscribes itself in indelible ink. Just because we're swept up in the story, must we also tell it? *Lizkor* says yes. Being part of history obligates us to record it. Not for an audience of our peers or co-witnesses, not to have people weigh in and offer feedback. Our first-hand account is for a future we're not a part of, a future that we hope to influence.

So here we find ourselves, one year since the deadliest attack in Israel's history, swaths of our own country inflamed with the pernicious rash of anti-Semitism, facing another consequential presidential election, and I'm exhorting us all this High Holy Days, to record our lives. In diaries, emails, voice notes, letters to the editor, opinion editorials, photographs, drawings and by any other means of self-expression – please! - do not underestimate the value of your life, the value of your testimony to this fitful period in Jewish history. We are, each of us, today's primary sources.

I'm asking a lot, I realize. It's draining to face the news each day, to worry about the hostages and their families, and the hundreds of thousands in Israel and in Gaza still displaced from their homes, and the viscerally uncertain future of our United States. Can't surviving this time be triumphant enough? Dayenu? Doesn't giving money and hanging posters and shouting anthems and praying for peace count for something? It all counts, and yet we cannot surrender the telling of history to others. We see how fraught is the editorial battle over the Gaza War, how much more so then do our voices matter in telling the story of what it means to live as a Jew in these harrowing times. Our aching worry and our quotidian unease warrant new words.

It's hard to find a grammar, to fit our feelings into sentences and images.¹¹ Augustine called this "the present of things passed" the idea that our memories are not the actual

¹⁰ On September 11, 2001, Congregation Rodeph Sholom lost Joshua Todd Aron, Ruben Correa, Steven Geller, Andrew Kates, and Brian Murphy, *zichronam livracha*.

¹¹ Hisham Matar, *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* (New York: Random House, 2017) 145.

events we experienced but words conceived from our images of them.¹² So many of us struggle to translate the imprints of memory into language. We doubt the unique value of our perspective and are tempted to saw off the edges of individual experience for the sake of a simpler, collective understanding. But the inclination to omit ourselves is not humble; it's destructive. Our descendants cannot take counsel from blank pages.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks pithily observed, "We are the story we tell ourselves about ourselves."¹³ So why not just include the voices of the Anne Frank's and the Anat Gavrieli's, we might ask. The innocent hopefuls. "Research shows that diverse groups remember more accurately than homogeneous ones do."¹⁴ In fact, groups remember more fully if a wide range of group members contribute to a discussion, especially the less powerful.¹⁵ If we want the story we tell ourselves about ourselves to attest to the intricacies of this time, we must each claim our role as primary sources.

Our Yom Kippur Torah reading in *parshat Nitzavim* addresses itself to tall orders. At the end of Deuteronomy, as Moses prepares to die, he implores the Israelites to heed their covenant with God. Like us, they anticipated tumultuous times. And yet Moses reminds them that keeping the mitzvot, inscribing Judaism into history, is possible:

Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach.

לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא

It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us...Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea...

כִּי־קְרוֹב אֵלָיךְ הַדְּבָר מְאֹד

No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.¹⁶

¹² Frank Kermode, "Palaces of Memory," *Memory: An Anthology*, Harriet Harvey Wood and A.S. Byatt, eds. (London: Chatto and Windus, 2008) 5.

¹³ Jonathan Sacks, *Judaism's Life Changing Ideas; A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (New Milford: Maggid, 2020) 77-80.

¹⁴ Jerome Groopman, "[Can Forgetting Help You Remember?](#)," *The New Yorker*, 13 May 2024 [accessed 20 May 2024].

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 30:11-14

Lo vashamayim hee - it's not in the heavens. What God expects of us, what history asks of us -it's not out of reach. We are capable, and even more so, we are obligated. We can sit at our keyboard or easel, we can be old school and pick up a pen and respond to this prompt: Where do I fall at this moment on the spectrum between fear and hope? Seriously. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable. Take a deep breath. I'm asking us all to pause and consider for a moment "Where am I?"

To stake our claim in the evolving shape of Jewish identity, an identity vulnerable to the perversions of falsehood and manipulation, we must flood the record with our truth. What happened? What did we witness? Have rifts emerged between loved ones? Do we find ourselves reconsidering long held ideas or relationships? Are you worrying ceaselessly? Why and for whom? These attestations are the trademarks of history and memory. If it's hard to be precise, we record what we can and feel encouragement from the first century words of Rabbi Tarfon, "It's not [our] duty to complete the work, but neither are [we] free to desist from it."¹⁷

Dr. Yerushalmi "recognized that what's important is remembered and that this becomes part of the consciousness of people."¹⁸ The horrors of October 7 and its aftermath will become part of Jewish consciousness. *Lizkor*. Record it. As history's subjects and objects, we are best positioned to create the evidence of this time. Let's leave so much of ourselves behind. Let future generations take counsel from our nuance and diversity. Write your truth. Know how important you are. Each of us, a primary source, can testify in our imperfect grammar to the path we walked through this crucible. May our diverse memory ensure the accuracy of our record. And may our eternal work of becoming holy entail one more mitzvah, one more commandment: to encode a facet of every one of our luminous, seeking, sacred souls on the historic record of the Jewish People.

¹⁷ Pirkei Avot 2:16

¹⁸ Quote by Dr. Elisheva Carlebach, from Joseph Berger, "[Yosef H. Yerushalmi, Scholar of Jewish History, Dies at 77](#)," *The New York Times*, 10 Dec 2009 [accessed 19 Aug 2024].