Memory, History and Us: Thoughts for Parashat Vayhi

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayhi

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Some time ago, I was watching old home movies that were filmed during the early 1950s. On the screen I saw myself as a little boy. The movies were filled with laughing, dancing, singing relatives and friends—most of whom are no longer alive. I had the surrealistic experience of watching my parents—both long deceased—when I was actually much older than they were at the time when the movies were taken.

Looking at old movies or old photographs has a way of casting a spell on us. It transports us into the past. For a few short moments, we may vividly feel that we've returned to the past, that we are reliving an earlier time in our lives.

Studies of memory have demonstrated that we do not merely remember past events, but we also remember the feelings associated with those events. We smell freshly baked bread—and suddenly we are a child in our mother's kitchen. We hear a synagogue melody—and suddenly we are a little boy holding our father's hand in the synagogue, we are a little girl sidling up against our mother.

Our lives are deeply enriched by the memories of our past. We especially value those precious instants when we seem to be transported into the past, into the world of our memories.

This phenomenon has great relevance for our understanding of our relationship to history. As Jews, and as human beings, we are able to expand our memories far beyond our own personal experiences. By reading and studying, we enlarge our historical memories to include the generations that have preceded us. The more expansive our knowledge of the Jewish past, the more intense and the more vibrant should be our own Jewishness. We see the past not as something distant

and impersonal, referring to others; but rather, we experience history as part of our own extended memory. It is personal and immediate. We empathize with and identify with our ancestors, almost as though we are with them.

This week's Torah reading includes Jacob's blessing of his grandchildren and concludes with the words: "and let my name be named in them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth" (Bereishith 48:16). The medieval Italian Jewish commentator, Rabbi Ovadia Seforno, suggests that Jacob wanted his descendants to feel linked to their righteous ancestors, so that they would live their lives so as to be worthy progeny of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were to recall their ancestors not as abstract personalities, but as genuine presences in their lives.

For the Jewish people, history has always been experienced as a dimension of the present. As we go through life, we bring along our ancestors. We carry their names, we feel their presence.

Professor Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, in his book "Zakhor," makes a distinction between history and memory. History is an academic discipline dedicated to uncovering data from the past. It is cold, objective, dispassionate. On the other hand, memory is warm and personal. Professor Yerushalmi notes a paradox that while modern Jewry has experienced a phenomenal explosion in the field of Jewish history, at the same time the Jewish memory seems to have declined seriously. Jews may know more facts about Jewish history, but they may feel less connected to those facts.

We need to understand without any equivocation that Jewishness lives and is transmitted by means of memory, by feeling a living connection with our past. The study of history should lead us to expand our memories and our identification with our people's past; it should help us to feel that we are part of the long chain of Jewish tradition.

Home movies and old photographs are made of inanimate material. The people in the pictures cannot change. What gives life to the figures is our memory. Likewise, the data of Jewish history can only come alive if we animate them, if we treat them not as abstractions but as real and ongoing presences in our lives, if we can feel—at least at special moments—that we ourselves have re-entered the past.

Our continuity as a people is inextricably linked to our historical memory. We bring the past into the present; we project the present into the future. This is one

of the great responsibilities of Jewish parents and grandparents—to imbue the younger generations with a sense of belonging to, and participating in, the history of our people.

This is also one of our great privileges and a source of our deepest fulfillment as Jews.

Angel for Shabbat