Remembering Not to Forget: Thoughts for Parashat Vayeshev

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Angel for Shabbat—Parashat Vayeshev

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

"And the chief butler did not remember Joseph, and he forgot him" (Bereshith 40:23)

Joseph successfully interpreted the butler's dream, assuring him that he would soon be released from prison and regain his former position in Pharaoh's court. Joseph then asked the butler to intercede on his behalf so that Joseph too could be freed from prison where he had been unjustly held.

But when the butler regained his freedom, the Torah informs us that he 1) did not remember Joseph and 2) he forgot Joseph. While these phrases seem redundant, they point to two different things.

The butler did not remember Joseph. He was busy with his responsibilities. He had a lot on his mind. It is natural enough for people not to remember to say thank you, or to ignore responsibilities that are not pressing. If they are reminded, they might then take the proper action.

But willfully forgetting is another matter. It is not only a matter of being too busy or too careless to remember. It is about pushing the obligation far into the back of one's mind so that it is almost totally inaccessible. The butler not only didn't remember Joseph; he forgot Joseph. Joseph wasn't even a faint memory tugging at his consciousness. Only after two years was the butler's memory jarred when Pharaoh needed his dreams to be interpreted. Only then, when the butler thought he could be useful to Pharaoh, did he remember Joseph.

Like the butler, we sometimes don't remember things because we are preoccupied with other seemingly more pressing matters. We don't remember to call a friend; or to make that contribution; or to express appreciation to those who have helped us. A gentle reminder might get us back on track.

But sometimes, we deeply forget. We don't feel tugs of guilt or remorse; we proceed with life as though the memories simply don't exist. It takes a jolt to make us retrieve the past. Maybe it's a life crisis. Maybe it's the passing of a loved one. Maybe it's an urgent cry from someone in need.

All people sometimes don't remember something or someone important. This is unfortunate but understandable. But it is more problematic when one insensitively and actively forgets something or someone important.

Are there people and things we should be remembering…but we're not remembering? A little mindfulness can help us. But are there people and things we have forgotten about…and most definitely should not have forgotten about? We need to think carefully and not wait for a crisis to awaken our memory.

The butler didn't remember Joseph; that was bad. The butler forgot Joseph; that was very bad.

Now, let's apply the lesson to ourselves!