

MEMORY AND RESPONSIBILITY: A JEWISH VIEW

BY PROF. JEAN HALPÉRIN

A few weeks ago I received a letter from a Russian Orthodox lady who is now eighty years old. We had worked together at the United Nations for many years. I always admired her, and still admire her, for her steadfastness, her faith and her concern for others.

In her letter to me she said: "Tomorrow is the Sunday on which we begin to fast, and in order to duly prepare myself, I must ask you to forgive me for any offense committed willfully or unwillfully. Please tell me, if you can: "The Lord will forgive you: *Gospod' prostit!*"

I told her that I had been deeply moved by her request, the more so that we had exactly the same tradition on the eve of our great fast day, Yom Kippur. Prior to praying to the Almighty to forgive our sins toward Him, we beg forgiveness of all with whom we are in touch, using literally the same words: "willfully or unwillfully."

If I share with you this piece of private correspondence (which I would normally not do!), it is because I was impressed to discover that the Orthodox Church had clearly taken over, in an identical fashion, a commandment and a tradition with which I, as a Jew, have been brought up from childhood.

It is a sign of closeness between our two faith communities. As well as a striking illustration of the ethical dimension of our responsibility as human beings toward others and toward the Creator.

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Memory, well understood, teaches us responsibility. Thus, memory must be seen as commitment and awareness. Remembering does not imply that we live in the past. Quite the contrary, it is memory that knits together the past, the present and the future.

Our individual and collective responsibility rests on our relationship to the past, to the present and to the future, it being understood that none of these three dimensions can be separated from the two others. To a large extent, the present is the consequence of the past which is never totally closed, and the future largely depends on what we, collectively and individually, do — or do not do — here and now.

It is highly significant that the commandment to remember, *zakhor*, is repeated 169 times in the Torah. Moreover, this commandment is never formulated in an abstract or general way; on the contrary, it is always in a specific form. It is, therefore, not just a vague or theoretical exhortation. Let me illustrate this with a few examples.

In our treatment of strangers, we are commanded to remember our experience as strangers. Exodus 23:9 — “Thou shalt not oppress the stranger; for you know the heart of a stranger, seeing you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Leviticus 19:34 — “The stranger that dwells with you shall be to you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

We are commanded to remember specific events considered as having been central and decisive in view of their importance, such as the creation of the world, the exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the wandering in the desert for forty years.

We are also commanded to remember experiences through which we went because of the teaching which stems out of them: slavery and oppression in Egypt, the episode of the golden calf, the fight against Amalek as symbol of evil, and also the misdeeds of the people, the consequences of slander or of gratuitous hatred.

Again, we are commanded to remember the Shabbat as a paradigm of a certain way of being and behaving and which, characteristically reminds us of both the creation and the exodus; or Jerusalem for all that it symbolizes both in terms of the particular and of the universal; or the Land of Israel. We remind the Lord of His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to Moses and to the Prophets, as well as the sufferings of our people.

Due attention must also be paid to the historical significance of the holy days in our calendar. For instance, in two weeks from now we shall celebrate *Pesach*, Passover, all over the world as if we ourselves had participated in that liberation from slavery, and we shall teach our children how it happened. But we also shall remember what happened to us,

generation after generation, at that time of the year when it coincided with the Christian Holy Week and became an occasion for attacks upon Jews.

Two weeks later, we shall commemorate the uprising of the fighters of the ghetto in Warsaw, and also the frightful extermination in 1942 and 1943 of our brethren in Thessaloniki, whose forefathers had settled there after the expulsion from Spain in 1492 and had developed over the centuries one of the most beautiful Jewish communities in the world, of which so tragically little is left today.

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Nothing is ever self-evident, particularly when we deal with basic issues.

It must thus be acknowledged that there can be a bad usage of memory, precisely when the latter is disconnected from responsibility and when it turns into complacency and narcissism, or even becomes pathological. Our teachings and our sages are there to ceaselessly warn us not to fall into that kind of a trap.

Memory, properly understood, must lead to a way of being and acting, so as to help us in responding to our calling and vocation as human beings.

Paraphrasing the French dictum *noblesse oblige*, I would submit that we should take at least as seriously *mémoire oblige*.

Time and again we are reminded that we have been the witnesses of events that have shaped our identity, and that we are called upon to transmit to future generations and to mankind the testimony that we carry with us.

Our generation, which has seen with its own eyes events such as the *Sboab* and the rebirth of the State of Israel, must feel particularly challenged by words spoken in Deuteronomy 4:9: "Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest you forget the things which thy eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them to thy children and thy children's children."

It is no accident if a man like the writer Vassili Grossman, in one of the finest books of world literature, *Jizn i Sud'ba* ("Life and Fate"), re-discovered in the midst of the darkest times such new and yet such old concepts as *miloserdie* ("mercy," "charity") and *dobrota* ("goodness") which had almost disappeared from the Russian vocabulary in seventy years.

It is by remaining faithful to the experience through which we have lived and to our memory that we can best contribute to a betterment of the world in which we live. Memory teaches us that we are not allowed

to underestimate the two pillars of our faith which are hope and responsibility.

Significant lessons can be drawn from our liturgy which calls us to carefully read on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, chapter 58 of Isaiah and the Book of Jonah. This also illustrates the dynamic dimension of memory seen as an educational and pedagogical factor.

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In order not to sound provocative, I would like to share with you thoughts that have been expressed by a Christian Orthodox theologian, F. Michel Evdokimov, only a few years ago in 1985. They seem to me to be most relevant to the topic with which we now deal:

The calls addressed to the Churches, particularly the "Ten Points of Seelisberg" in 1947, the position taken by Christian churches such as the Declaration on the Jews of Vatican Council II (1965), other statements issued by churches coming from the Reformation or from leaders of Orthodox churches, not to mention resolutions adopted by the Assemblies of the World Council of Churches, should call for sincere endorsement by the faithful of the Orthodox churches. An enormous task of catechetical teaching should be undertaken in order to properly evaluate the legacy received from Judaism and make us aware of the monstrous consequences of antisemitism in the course of history, of the responsibility born by our church in that matter, more particularly through certain unfortunate liturgical formulations whose meaning has been corrupted throughout the ages.

Even if the dogmatic theology and the articles of faith do not contain any trace of antisemitism, let us recognize that the *lex orandi* has sometimes given rise to *lex credendi* and has misguided the mind of certain faithful. This is where we rejoin the point seven in the "Ten Points of Seelisberg": "Avoid describing the Passion in such a way as to imply that the onus of the killing of Jesus falls on all the Jews or on the Jews alone ... for the cross that saves us all, reveals that it is because of the sins of all of us that Christ has died."

Passive tolerance is no longer adequate. It must be transformed into an active understanding and friendship on the side of those who share in such a spiritual patrimony and who want to accomplish the will of the one God, His justice toward men and all mankind, and share in His grace in accordance with the blessing given to Abraham: "all nations of the Earth will be blessed in your posterity" (Gen. 22:18).

Evdokimov also stressed that in the Christian Orthodox prayer book there is so much intimacy with the Hebrew Bible, so close a relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, so much deep inspiration drawn from the Psalms, that this in itself in a way creates elements of a common memory. As it were, we are thus fellow travelers in prayer and

in belief, which adds a specific meaning to our joint journey in this world.

A great Russian thinker who is now being re-discovered by many — and who indeed deserves being studied — Vladimir Soloviev, strikingly illustrates the importance, from a Christian point of view, of carefully listening to Judaism. He is among those who take the latter seriously, not only religiously and philosophically, but even existentially. His complete works testify to his profound knowledge of the Hebrew language and of the Jewish sources, including post-biblical ones. Only a few months before his death, he planned to produce an annotated translation of the Hebrew Bible. On his death bed, he was begging those who surrounded him: “Don’t let me sleep. Let me pray for the Jewish people ... I must pray for them,” and he started reciting aloud the Psalms in Hebrew. Some say that his last words were *Shema Israel*, spoken in Hebrew.

According to Soloviev, the Hebrew prophets were those who best realized that genuine patriotism leads to true universalism. In the study “The Spiritual Foundations of Life,” Soloviev spells out words which almost literally echo the Jewish liturgy of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. On those days we affirm that “repentance, prayer and charity” can avert a harsh verdict on our shortcomings. In Soloviev’s formulation: “Prayer, charity and fasting are the three fundamental acts of inner religious life, the three bases of inner religion.” He is never tired of repeating to his Christian brethren that they must keep alive the memory of the Jewish people and the Jewish wisdom if they want to remain faithful to themselves and to their own creed. Hence, his well-known pronouncement: “There is no Jewish question but a Christian question.” Patriotism, he said, must recover its true meaning, and no longer be understood as hatred of foreigners and of other beliefs, but as acting kindness to one’s own people. It is memory which makes of human dignity the basic value, a way of fighting evil.

Maybe we should ponder the fact that the Hebrew word for religion is *emunah* which means faith, belief, trust. However, the semantic content of this word as illustrated by its root *a-m-n* also implies that genuine belief must be understood as a piece of art (*omanut*) and requires the expertise and care of a craftsman (*umman*) to be fully practiced.

He who has no memory has no future. Whether we like it or not, we all are witnesses and we bear the burden of it, which means that we must remain on the record.

This also teaches us that memory rules out indifference or any kind of passivity in the face of evil or injustice. The current threats of racism, xenophobia, fanaticism and antisemitism all over the world should

make us even more aware of the importance of memory in the shaping of a better world.

I cannot help feeling that we should all heed the admonition of one of our greatest sages, Hillel, who used to say: "If I do not account for myself, who will account for me? And if I am for my own self only, what am I? (Not simply: '*who* am I,' but *what* am I? which means that I almost lose my dignity as a human being.) And if not now, i.e., at once, when?" (Mishnah Avot 1:14).

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