Lesson 11 - History & Memory, Moral Growth

History vs. Memory

Jews were the first people to write history – many centuries before Herodotus and Thucydides, often wrongly described as the first historians. Yet biblical Hebrew has no word that means "history" (the closest equivalent is divrei hayamim, "chronicles"). Instead it uses the root zakhor, meaning "memory." Twenty-one times in Deuteronomy, Moses uses the verb Z-KH-R, to remember. Fourteen times he warns the people not to forget. There is a fundamental difference between history and memory. History is "his story,"4 an account of events that occurred sometime else to someone else. Memory is "my story." It is the past internalized and made part of my identity. History is an answer to the question, "What happened?" Memory is an answer to the question, "Who am I?"

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt and lived there, few in number, there becoming a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians ill-treated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil, and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. (Deut. 26:5–8)

It is written in the first person: "My father.... The Lord brought us out of Egypt." This is history transformed into memory. This is not a detached tale of some disembodied past. It is the story of where I came from and who I am.

Jews have told the story of who we are for longer and more devotedly than any other people on the face of the earth. That is what makes Jewish identity so rich and resonant.

The gift of collective memory is precious. Winston Churchill once said: "The longer you can look back, the further you can see forward."9 Those who tell the story of their past have already begun to build their children's future.

Listening and Moral Growth

From Deuteronomy 5 to 26 Moses has set out, in their full panoply, the laws of the covenant, the basic structure of a society under the sovereignty of God, from the most general outline to the most detailed specifics.

God and follow His commands and decrees that I give you today" (Deut. 27:9–10).

The distinguished philosopher of modern times, Immanuel Kant, mounted a double challenge to religious ethics. The first had to do with a distinction he made between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. A hypothetical imperative has the form, "If…then": "If you want to be happy, this is how to behave"; "If you want to avoid punishment, this is what you should not do." Categorical imperatives come with no "if"s: "Do not lie"; "Do not cheat"; "Do not kill." They apply regardless of what you want. Morality, said Kant, is about categorical imperatives, not hypothetical ones.

First, to obey God for the sake of reward or to avoid punishment may be sensible and pragmatic, but it is not being moral. We are moral when we do things that are right because they are right, not for the sake of reward or punishment. The second has to do with his distinction between heteronomy and autonomy. Heteronomy means a law imposed by someone else. Autonomy means a law imposed by ourselves. And, said Kant, to be moral is to be autonomous – to do right because we have decided that it is the right thing to do, not because someone else – even God – has said so. **Therefore to obey the Bible is not to be moral.**

Kant was simply wrong – the distinctions made by Kant are not either/or. Rather, they represent developmental stages. We begin, in childhood, by doing things to receive reward or avoid punishment, and because someone else, usually a parent, has told us what to do or not do. Eventually, though, we develop our own internalized conscience, and learn that right and wrong do not depend on punishment or reward.

What Moses is doing in Deuteronomy is something very subtle. He is speaking at different levels to people at different stages in their moral and spiritual development. At the most basic level he is speaking to a nation still in its childhood. So he speaks to them in very simple terms. Follow God and be blessed, or follow your own inclinations and be cursed. This is the way one might speak to a child.

But interwoven in his speeches is an appeal to a much deeper level of understanding. The pinnacle of the moral life, to which we should all aspire, is precisely to do what is right because it is right, because that is what it is to walk in God's ways. That is why the key word of Deuteronomy is shema, the word that is untranslatable precisely because it covers this multiplicity of senses from simple obedience to deep internalization.

The Torah lacks a word that means simple, blind obedience because that is the relation between a slave-owner and a slave: the slave-owner orders and the slave obeys. There is no active thought process involved. God, who created us in His image, giving us freedom and the power to think, wants us to understand His commands.

It uses three devices to show that Jewish law is not arbitrary, a mere decree.

First, evident throughout the book of Deuteronomy, is the giving of reasons for the commands.

The second is the juxtaposition of narrative and law, as if to say, the law is best understood against the backdrop of history and the experience of the Israelites in their formative years.

The third is the connection between law and the underlying order of the cosmos. There is a strong link between Genesis 1, the story of creation, and the laws of holiness. Both belong to Torat Kohanim, the priestly voice, and both are about order and the maintenance of boundaries. The laws against mixing meat and milk, wool and linen, and so on, are about respecting the deep structure of nature as described in the opening chapter of the Torah.

That is why Moses, consistently throughout Deuteronomy, uses the verb SH-M-A. He wants the Israelites to obey God, but not blindly or through fear alone. God did not give the Torah to Israel for His sake but for theirs.

That is the meaning of Moses' great words: "Be silent, Israel, and listen" (Deut. 27:9). Keeping the commands involves an act of listening, not just submission and blind obedience – in all of listening's multiple senses of attending, meditating, and reflecting. It means understanding our limits and imperfections as human beings and remembering what it felt like to be a slave in Egypt. It involves humility and memory and gratitude. But it does not involve abdication of the intellect or silencing of the questioning mind.

God is not a tyrant, but a teacher. He seeks not just our obedience but also our understanding. All nations have laws, and laws are there to be obeyed. **But few nations other than Israel set it as their highest task to understand why the law is as it is**. Shema is the Torah's call to moral growth.