“The Gift of Forgetting”

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People who are “of an age” make jokes about forgetting. Forgetting names, dates, words, you name it.

What we tend not to forget are the events in our past that continue to embarrass us. Long after the people we’ve harmed, insulted, or neglected have forgotten our mess-ups, we ourselves remember.

However, we don’t *entirely* remember. The sting goes away. The red face returns to its normal color. We pick up and go on. If we continued to wallow in our disgrace, we could never live out the rest of our lives except scrunched over in a corner. The ability to forget the worst of things is a great human trait.

Menachem Mendel Morgenstern, the Rebbe of Kotzk, called this ability to forget a “divine gift.” He identifies its source in our weekly portion, *Ha’azinu*.

*Ha’azinu* is a grand poem in the epic style, tacked onto the end of the Torah. Moses is presented as declaiming this poem as a swan song to his people Israel. “Give ear, O Heavens, and I will speak; Listen, O Earth, to my words.” (For Bible studies buffs, this poem is meant to look ancient like the Song of the Sea or Deborah’s Song, but it is probably of much later origin than the rest of Deuteronomy.)

In any case, one line stands out for the Kotzker. It is a derogatory comment whereby Moses accuses the Israelites of forgetting the God who brought them from nowhere to somewhere; from the slave pits of Egypt to the threshold of a new tomorrow. Here is the verse:

“You neglected the Rock that begot you, forgot the God who brought you forth.”

צור ילדך תשי, ותשכח אל מחללך

The straightforward sense of the verse is that the Israelites are an ungrateful bunch. They know darn well whom they should be grateful to, but they pretend they got here by themselves and owe their God nothing in terms of loyalty or morality.

The Kotzker, in his remarkably creative misreading, turns the verse sideways. Instead of “you forgot the Rock, i.e., God, who begot you,” he reads it as “the Rock begot you with forgetting,” meaning that God birthed humanity with the capacity to forget. Then, instead of “you forgot the God who brought you forth,” he reads “You rejected the God who gave you ‘forgetting.’”

Here are his own words:

The Blessed Holy One planted in you the characteristic of *teshi,* “forgetting,” so that you might forget all of the *tzuris* and awful events that befell you. And this is to your benefit, so that you would be able to exist and continue with your life. And in the end, , ותשכח אל מחללך “you rejected the God who gave you ‘forgetting.’” You use that precious human characteristic in order to forget the one who created you.

This portion is always read right before or after Yom Kippur, and certainly within a week and a half of Rosh Hashanah, the “day of remembrance,” *Yom Hazikaron*. It would seem that the tradition is giving us not a mixed message, but a double-edged message.

On the one hand, we are asked to promise to forget enough of our failures and shortcomings to be able to commit ourselves forward to a renewed and rejuvenated life. To make that kind of commitment, we will need to believe in ourselves more than we probably deserve to do.

On the other hand, we are adjured to “remember” who we are, what we are, where we came from, and, lest it be forgotten, where we are ultimately going. We need to “return” to our ultimate source, at least in our minds and hearts. Only then can we use these remarkable gifts of forgetting and remembering to “write ourselves,” as it were, in the indelible Book of Life,” the book that never lets us forget.