



Vayakhel

Vol. 9, Issue 19 • 21 Adar 5785 / March 21, 2025

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Remembering the Future: Reflections on the Six Remembrances for a People That Needs to Learn to Step Back From History

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In many *siddurim*, following the morning service, six remembrances are printed, each one a verse commanding us to remember (or not to forget) something. They are:

- 1) **The Exodus from Egypt:** “. . .So that you shall remember the day when you went out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life” (Deuteronomy 16:3).
- 2) **The Revelation at Sinai:** “But beware and watch yourself very well, lest you forget the things that your eyes saw, and lest

these things depart from your heart, all the days of your life, and you shall make them known to your children and to your children’s children—the day you stood before the L-rd your G-d at Horeb” (Deuteronomy 4:9-10).

- 3) **Amalek’s attack on Israel:** “You shall remember what Amalek did to you on the way, when you went out of Egypt, how he happened upon you on the way and cut off all the stragglers at your rear, when you were faint and weary, and did not fear G-d. [Therefore,] it will be, when the L-rd your G-d grants you respite from all your enemies around [you] in the land which the L-rd, your G-d, gives to you as an inheritance to possess, that you shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek

from beneath the heavens. You shall not forget!" (Deuteronomy 25:17-19).

- 4) **The Golden Calf and rebelling in the desert:** "Remember, do not forget, how you angered the L-rd, your G-d, in the desert..." (Deuteronomy 9:7).
- 5) **God's punishment of Miriam:** "Remember what the L-rd, your G-d, did to Miriam on the way, when you went out of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 24:9).
- 6) **The Sabbath:** "Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it" (Exodus 20:8).

The order of these remembrances is curious. It is not chronological, nor does it follow the order of the appearance of the events in the Torah; it also does not follow the order of the verses being cited to remember the events. What is the effect of remembering these things together, and, specifically, in this particular order?

Below, I offer a reflection on how the arc of the six remembrances offers us an antidote for an unhealthy presentism that has plagued the Jewish people since the time of Egypt. I will argue that embedded in these remembrances is a program to live beyond the panic and chaos of any crisis that happens to be in the present, by remaining squarely focused on the Torah education of children infused with certainty in the future.

Remembrance #1: The Day You Left Egypt: Children are the Key to Redemption

The first remembrance in the order it appears in the *siddur* is that of the Exodus from Egypt:

So that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt as long as you live. (Deut. 16:3)

We begin with the remembrance of *the day* we left Egypt, perhaps because this day offers us an archetype not just for all future redemptions but for all future days, insofar as each day offers the possibility of a unique redemption.

The question is, what can one learn from the day we left Egypt about *how* to accomplish this daily redemption? The Israelites left Egypt in the following way:

... at the end of the four hundred and thirtieth year, to the very day, **all the ranks of God (*kol tzivot Hashem*)** departed from the land of Egypt. (Ex. 12:41)

Indeed, the Torah repeatedly uses the bolded expression above to describe how God is taking out the Jewish people (Ex. 6:26, 7:4, 12:41). Rashi comments on those earlier passages that this expression, "*tzivot*," refers to marching in the formation of the tribes (i.e., according to the fathers) (Ex. 6:26). On a simple level, this perhaps alludes to the role that maintaining social structures played in meriting the Exodus (i.e., maintaining language and names, and not speaking gossip, "*lashon hara*" (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 48:21)). This meaning of *tzivot* expresses the importance of maintaining our integrity to the past, but there is a subtler meaning of *tzivot* that

Rashi only alludes to later, which completes the recipe for redemption.

Commenting on the verse, “He made the laver of copper, and its stand of copper, from the mirrors of the women who congregated (*“be-mar’ot ha-tzove’ot”*) at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” (Ex. 38:8), Rashi explains this expression as follows:¹

The daughters of Israel had in their possession copper mirrors which they would look into when they would beautify themselves. Even those mirrors they did not withhold from bringing for the contribution towards the *mishkan*. But Moses rejected them because they were made for accomplishing the ends of the Evil Inclination. The Holy One, Blessed is He, said: “Accept them, because these are the dearest to me of all, for by means of them, the women established many legions of offspring in Egypt.” When their husbands would be exhausted by the racking labor imposed upon them by the Egyptians, they would go and bring them food and drink, and feed them. Then, they would take the mirrors, and each one would view

herself with her husband in the mirror, and entice him with words, saying, “I am handsomer than you.” By these means, they would bring their husbands to desire, and would have relations with them, and conceive and give birth there, as it is said, “Under the apple tree I aroused you.” This is what is meant by that which is said, “with the mirrors of those who congregated (*be-mar’ot ha-tzove’ot*). The *kiyyor* (laver) was made of them, because it is meant to make peace between man and wife, to give drink from the water in it to one whose husband warned her against secluding herself with another man, and she nonetheless secluded herself with him... Thus did R. Tanhuma expound.

Rashi’s explanation gives us the other half of the story that his simple explanation of the term “*tzivot*” (Ex. 6:26) left out. By connecting “*kol tzivot Hashem*” to the laver (*kiyyor*) and R. Tanhuma’s explanation, Rashi alludes to what is taught in *Sotah* (11b) with regard to women and the taking of water:

Rav Avira taught: In the merit of the righteous women that were in that

¹ [*Rashi: The Torah With Rashi’s Commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated*](#) (4th ed.), translated by R. Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg, R. Yaakov Petroff, and R. Yoseph

Kamenetsky, (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1999), Vol.2.

generation, the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt... And they would then take what they prepared to their husbands, to the field, and would bathe their husbands and anoint them...

In remembering the day we left Egypt, we remember that we left Egypt in “ranks.” This formation as tribes alludes to the fathers, but the very existence of the children alludes to the mothers. We thereby remember that we were only redeemed in the merit of the righteous women of that generation who, despite impossible circumstances and no clear picture of how a *future* redemption would come about, nevertheless not only knew with certainty that such a redemption would indeed transpire, but acted on that knowledge at great personal risk to themselves.

In short, this dynamic of remembering a past in which our ancestors both honored their past and looked towards the future, serves as a daily recipe for redemption as well as a foundation for the other remembrances, which in turn gives us greater insight into how to reconcile this past and future with the various causes and consequences of this delicate balance breaking down. As we will see throughout, children represent the fullest expression of this unification.

Remembrance #2: Not Forgetting Sinai and the Children, Guarantors of the Torah

The redemption remains incomplete because the righteous women of that generation bore children

conditional upon a future redemption not yet completed at the Exodus. As the Mishnah teaches, the freedom which began on Pesach was only fully realized in the ultimate freedom, the study of Torah (*Pirkei Avot* 6:2).

But at Mount Sinai, before the Israelites could achieve this freedom of Torah study, God demanded guarantors that the Israelites would observe the Torah before He gave it to the Jews (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:4). The Israelites first suggested their ancestors. God did not reject this suggestion but instead responded that the ancestors too need guarantors. This alludes to the importance, but incompleteness, of merely preserving the social structures of the fathers. The Israelites only merited to receive the Torah on the promise that *the children* would be the guarantors through their study. The beauty of this *midrash* is that the study of the children is not merely a means to an end for the children’s future observance (“Train a child according to his way; even when he grows old, he will not turn away from it (Proverbs 22:6)). Rather, a child’s studies are the best guarantee of the *parents’* observance.

This message is reinforced in the wording of the remembrance:

But beware and watch **yourself** very well, lest **you** forget the things that your eyes saw, and lest these things depart from your heart, all the days of your life, and **you shall make them known to your children and to your children’s**

children—the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb. (emphasis added)

In light of the above discussion, we can understand this verse as saying, “And how will you prevent yourself from forgetting this Torah? By teaching it to your children...” There are many ways we can understand this insight. Those who learn in order to teach will merit to learn and to teach (*Pirkei Avot* 4:6). Furthermore, our children hold us accountable, lest we deviate from the rules we try to impose on them, a particularly strong form of how we learn the most from our students (*Ta’anit* 7a). This is perhaps further reinforced by the fact that, in this verse, Moses is speaking to the generation who were the children at Sinai.

The irony this *midrash* brings home is that only by being focused on the future, i.e., the Torah education of children, can we in fact preserve our own fidelity to teachings of the past. It seems simple enough, but, as we will see in the next remembrances, the panic of the present easily causes us to lose sight of the future.

Remembrance #3: Amalek’s Attack and the Redemption of Purim

The third remembrance is of Amalek and the commandment to destroy the Amalekites completely. The commandment in *Parashat Zakhor* to remember Amalek is read directly before Purim because Haman was a descendant of Agag, king of Amalek (*Megillah* 13a). We might also add that Mordechai was a Benjaminite, as

was King Saul, who failed to kill Agag as commanded (*Meg.* 13a). Purim is therefore a kind of rematch to fulfill this third remembrance.

Purim is also the completion of the process which began at Mount Sinai. As the Sages of the Talmud teach (*Shabbat* 88a), God turned Mount Sinai over their heads and coerced the Jews into accepting the Torah, such that it was only at the time of Purim, when they accepted it willingly, that the “marriage” was valid.

Following the logic of the first two remembrances, both the sin which led to Amalek’s attacking us, and the ultimate remedy to destroy Amalek, can be explained. The sin that gave rise to the threat of Amalek was the betrayal of our fundamental commitment to the future redemption. This sin is ultimately overcome through the Torah study of children.

The Midrash (*Esther Rabbah* 7:18) explains that the Jews were destined for destruction because the men attended the banquet of King Ahashveirosh, as described at the beginning of the Book of Esther. The text emphasizes that the food and drink were “according to the law,” i.e. kosher (*Meg.* 13b). What, then, was so bad about this? Rabbi Yosei Bar Hanina expounds that King Ahashveirosh held the banquet to celebrate the end of what he understood to be 70 years since the Temple was destroyed and the Jews went into exile. Jeremiah had prophesied that the Jews would be redeemed after 70 years. King Ahashveirosh, thinking this deadline had passed, was celebrating the seeming falsification of the

prophecy, thereby implying permanency of the exile. The Jewish men who attended were either bought in or were too fearful to object. Either way, their actions implicitly denied a certainty in the future redemption. Without that commitment to the future, it doesn't matter if they dressed as Jews and ate as Jews, because they acceded to the arbitrary whims of political power and, therefore, were open to complete destruction by Amalek.

It should therefore not surprise us that the Jews were redeemed on Purim in the merit of the study of the children (*Esther Rabbah* 9, commenting on Esther 5:1). This was the completion of the process begun at the Exodus from Egypt, as made explicit by the Midrash (*Esther Rabbah* 8, commenting on Esther 4:15-17). Esther instituted her three days of fasting so that the third day coincided with the start of Pesach. When Mordechai objected, Esther retorted, "Elder of Israel, why is it Passover?" By gathering the children on the eve of Passover, Mordechai was recommitting the Jewish people to the guarantee made at Sinai, which was in turn the fulfillment of God's promise in Egypt.

Remembrance #4: How it All Comes Apart

By following the logic of the first three remembrances, we come to a unique understanding of one of the most baffling episodes in Jewish history, the sin of the Golden Calf. Simply put, the sin of the Golden Calf was possible because the men ignored the women, despairing of the future that was the precondition of the Exodus, and were therefore open to be ruled by arbitrary authority. That the cause of the

sin was lacking precisely what they needed to merit the Exodus from Egypt is alluded to in how the fourth remembrance is edited in the *siddur*. The going out of Egypt *is* mentioned in the verse from which the fourth remembrance is taken (Deut. 9:7), and yet, this part of the verse is not printed in any *siddur* (neither *nusah* Ashkenaz nor Sefarad) that features the Six Remembrances (at least not that I have found).

In Egypt, the men showed a short-sightedness and sense of doom that led them to not want to procreate, such that the women had to go to extraordinary lengths to cajole them (as explained in the Rashi we discussed in remembrance #1). In Persia, the men who attended the banquet showed a nihilism about the future because of a miscalculation of the 70-year period after which they were promised to return to Israel. It therefore shouldn't surprise us that the root of the sin of the Golden Calf came after the men similarly, prematurely, despaired of Moses' return.

Nor should Aaron's attempted solution surprise us either. When the Jews confronted Aaron to build the Golden Calf, he instructed them, "Remove the golden earrings that are on the ears of your wives..." but they did not do so; rather, they simply gave their own (Ex. 32:2-3). *Midrash Tanhuma* (Pinhas 7:1) explains that Aaron did not simply want to delay them, but calculated that if they had shared their plans with their wives, the wives would have stopped it (in a way that he clearly could not). This would be consistent with Aaron's status as a peacemaker between husband and wife (Rashi on Num. 20:29). This rejection of the

future is here explicitly connected to cutting the women out of the decision-making.

Of course, sadly, we know that Aaron failed to deter the men. But, one may ask, how do we know that the women would have disagreed? *Midrash Tanhuma* (Pinhas 7:1) says explicitly that the women protested. Even if we didn't have this source, we could still infer it: Rashi points out at the building of the *Mishkan* that the men brought their wives with their jewelry still on them (Ex. 35:22). According to the view that the *Mishkan* was an atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf (based on Rashi's chronology, commenting on Ex. 31:18), this makes perfect sense. The involvement of the women in the building of the *Mishkan* diametrically opposed their exclusion from the sin of the Golden Calf.

This dynamic of the men who didn't believe in a path forward, turning away from the women who did, is not unique to the sin of the Golden Calf, but indeed plays out across the various ways in which,

How you angered the Lord, your God, in the desert; from the day that you went out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebelling against the Lord. (Deut. 9:7)

In the sin of the spies, too (*Midrash Tanhuma*, Pinhas 7:1), we find that Moses specifically sent men (Num. 13:2). Indeed the choice to send men is significant, as this is one of the sources from which we derive the concept of *minyan*,

specifically as an atonement for men. Perhaps, had Moses sent women, they would not have sinned because, as the daughters of Tzelofhad showed us, the women loved the land. Indeed, none of the women were punished for the sin of the spies (Rashi on Num. 26:64).

Even more examples can be given of this point regarding the sins in the desert (e.g., the men straying after Midianite women). In all cases, the belief of the women in a future redemption is at the heart of the salvation of the Jewish people. And, chief among all the prophetesses is, of course, Miriam, to whom we now turn directly.

Remembrance #5: Miriam and the Incomplete Solution

In contrast to remembrance #4, in which the going out of Egypt is mentioned in the source text but not in the *siddur*, we find the opposite conundrum in remembrance #5. The verse states, "Remember what God did to Miriam on the way out of Egypt." But what does Miriam's punishment have to do with leaving Egypt? Miriam's role in the Exodus was as the leading figure in ensuring the unification of the men and women, and in promoting certainty in the Jewish future. Nevertheless, her punishment for the way she went about criticizing Moses, through *lashon hara* (refraining from *lashon hara* is one of three reasons the Jews merited redemption), undermined the very unification she championed. Furthermore, Miriam was unable to accept that there was a place for Moses' exceptional status as a prophet who was required to always be in the present, thereby requiring a certain kind of

“divorce” from the future, implied by being married and having children.

Miriam’s essential role in the Jews’ salvation from Egypt can best be encapsulated in her name, which breaks down to “*mar*” (bitter) and “*yam*” (sea). In both cases, Miriam’s role is linked to the women’s essential role in the redemption.

The bitterness, as we know from the Seder, refers to the slavery, and, in particular, Pharaoh's decree against the male babies. Rashi teaches that when Pharaoh issued this decree, Amram (Miriam, Aaron, and Moses’ father), who was the leader of the Jewish people, divorced his wife, Yokheved, and all the Jewish men did the same (Ex. 2:1). Miriam rebuked him, saying that his decree was even harsher than Pharaoh’s, for he decreed against *all* the Jewish children, whereas Pharaoh only decreed against the males (*Midrash Rabbah*, Shemot 1:13). Arguably, therefore, the bitterest moment for the Jews was not actually at the time of the decree, but at the time of Amram’s response, for only then was the total destruction of the Jewish people at stake. Amram relented and Moses was born, thus also tying this initial role of Miriam to her role in seeing that her baby brother survived. This pattern should be familiar to us, given all we've said about the above remembrances and the figurative “divorcing” of men from women, who could not see past the present moment.

The *yam* (sea) part of Miriam’s name refers, of course, to the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. Miriam led the women in praise of God, and, in contrast

to the men, they had instruments ready (Ex. 15:20). Rashi explains that they had taken out instruments because they expected to see miracles. This anticipation of the future repeats the same dynamic we saw earlier, in which the women anticipated the redemption and therefore were willing to have children.

So, we see that Miriam’s great leadership is tied up in the physical reproduction of the Jewish people, this fundamental certainty about the future, and the virtue (greater prophecy?) of the women more generally. We can therefore understand better why, according to Rashi, Miriam would have begun to speak out when her brother, similar to his father, divorced his wife, even if it was so that he could be available to learn from God at all times (Num. 12:1). On some level, perhaps, it must have seemed to Miriam that Moses was repeating what his father had done. Her reasons were essentially good, but the way she went about it was exactly self-defeating, and the application of her principle to Moses’ relationship to his wife was, in fact, incorrect.

Firstly, the way she went about speaking out was not just incorrect, but diametrically opposed to her end goals. If the problem was a lack of connection (to his wife and married life), the sin of evil speech specifically divides. This diametric opposition between the sin of evil speech and the Exodus from Egypt is perhaps hinted to in the Talmud, where it offers the view that when the entire nation brings the Paschal offering in a state of impurity, even a *zav* (one who has had an gonorrhoeal emission) could bring it with them, but

a *metzora* (one who has *tzara'at*, traditionally attributed to evil speech among other sins) cannot (*Pesachim* 67a). Additionally, in the earlier discussion of the reasons the Jews merited redemption from Egypt, refraining from *lashon hara* is listed along with not taking foreign clothes and names. Earlier, we said that refraining from speaking *lashon hara* is an example of maintaining the ethical standards of the fathers, but now we can appreciate it more fully as a *mitzvah* that specifically ensures harmonious family relations.

Secondly, Moses was different from Amram in two crucial ways. Amram separated from his wife *reactively* to the despair of the moment, and he inspired others to follow him. Moses separated *proactively* for the purpose of teaching, and indeed was put in a genuinely exceptional position by the Jews, asking that Moses receive the commandments from God directly on their behalf (at a time when husbands and wives were separated to maintain ritual purity). There is a role for spiritual leaders responsible for the spiritual reproduction of the people, who may thus be removed from the physical reproduction of the people, but they are the exception, not the rule (e.g., R. Shimon Bar Yohai; *Berakhot* 35b).

We see that the fifth remembrance, then, makes explicit this fundamental lesson about the connection between husband and wife that runs through the first four remembrances. It also introduces the exceptional dynamic that Moses had, wherein he was able to divorce his wife to focus entirely on his spiritual offspring (i.e., the nation as his Torah students). In order to redeem

the Jewish people, we need the coming together of the feminine and the masculine, as well as the physical and the spiritual reproduction of the people, what we might call the Miriam and the Moses principles.

If we can reconcile these principles, we could achieve the ultimate Redemption, the final Shabbat.

Remembrance #6: Shabbat, the Ultimate Reconciliation

The Six Remembrances culminate with Shabbat, both the weekly observance, but also the symbol of the world's completion, the fulfillment of its purpose in the messianic era. For if the Exodus from Egypt was our birth as a nation, and took place only in the merit of those women who believed in and acted on our future, then it stands to reason that our daily remembrance would culminate in Shabbat, which represents both our weekly and ultimate future.

Indeed, the idea of relating each day to Shabbat is manifested in the daily prayers in the fact that, in the Song of the Day, each day is counted in relation to Shabbat. There are two ways we can understand how our current moment relates to that ultimate future, which parallel two attitudes towards what it means to say, "this too is for the best." We could understand our current moment as a means to a good end, or we could understand this moment as intrinsically good, whatever the outward appearance, with the end merely revealing the deeper good that was there all along. These two attitudes also parallel two

different understandings of the value of children's Torah study. According to the first view, it is instrumentally valuable (i.e., if we teach our children Torah they will not depart from it in the future). According to the second view, the primary value of teaching children Torah is the effect it has on us and the world right now.

What this attitude towards this ultimate future means for our daily conduct can be illustrated by the different practices of Shammai and Hillel (*Beitzah* 16a):

It is taught: They said about Shammai the Elder that all his days he would eat in honor of Shabbat. If he found a choice animal, he would say: This is for Shabbat. If he subsequently found another one choicer than it, he would set aside the second for Shabbat and eat the first.

However, Hillel the Elder had a different trait, that all his actions, including those on a weekday, were for the sake of Heaven, as it is stated: "Blessed be the Lord, day by day; He bears our burden, our God who is our salvation; Selah." (Teh 68:20)

Both Shammai and Hillel have the future in mind but, whereas Shammai's faith in the future causes him to act now for the sake of the future, Hillel's

faith in the future causes him to act in every moment for the sake of that moment.

Hillel's exceptional quality parallels Moses' exceptional position as one who needed to be entirely present for revelation in every moment, and therefore couldn't be involved in marital relations. This is, in a sense, the positive expression of what we have characterized until now as the Israelite men's tendency to not see the future. But it's also true that Hillel conceded to Shammai on this point about saving one's best for Shabbat (*Peninei Halakha* 2:1). It is not realistic to expect most people to see the intrinsic good in the apparent evil of the moment, and it is perhaps even harder to educate our children on that principle. But regardless of how bad things might be in the moment, we are not allowed to give into the temptations of nihilism or presentism. We are not allowed to get distracted from our fundamental task as Jews at all times and in all places, which is the Torah education of our children.

Conclusion: Living With the Six Remembrances Day by Day

We are living through chaotic times, and this produces anxiety in us and in our children. But, every day, we are called on to step back from the false limits of the moment and realize that we can only bring about a secure future for the world by bringing about children (both literal children and spiritual children, i.e., students) and nurturing them properly in Torah study to make a better

world founded on certainty in that better future.

We can therefore understand why the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn, said the following at a *farbrengen* (Tevet 22, *Ha-YomYom*):

Just as wearing *tefillin* every day is a commandment, so too is it an absolute duty for every person to spend a half hour every day thinking about the Torah education of children.

It is clearly a biblical commandment to teach Torah to children, but from where does R. Schneersohn derive that it is daily in the same way as *tefillin*? The Torah states (Ex. 13:8-9):

And you shall explain to your child on that day, "It is because of what Hashem did for me when I went free from Egypt." And this shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead in order that the Teaching of Hashem may be in your mouth—that with a mighty hand God freed you from Egypt.

The Torah juxtaposes the commandment of *tefillin* to the commandment of specifically teaching your child about "the day" we left Egypt, thereby alluding to the fact that salvation is merited precisely by this teaching. May we all daily wrap our minds, hearts, and hands around providing

our Jewish children with a Torah education, infused with fidelity to our past and certainty in our future.

Six Levels of Mikva'ot

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0

Life is water. Creation, and the sky became a barrier between waters

Prayer sent heavenward would bring down rain, restoring life

"At the time of rain, all is pure"

1

After, the clouds disperse, the drops return to the upper or the lower realms

Flat ground dries but puddles remain. Cisterns slowly turning stagnant

Contaminated after human contact

2

Remnants stream from the mountains and soak through the earth

Pure as long as they keep moving. No-one steps into them twice

3

Ending in a cave or sunken place, at rest

If large enough for head and bulk

A *mikvah*, cold and silent amniotic waters of the soul

Wash your flesh, stripped and scrubbed of all encumbrance, and be reborn

4

Deeper are the mysteries of the lower waters
bubbling from the abyss, driven by unseen
tectonic urges
Some boiled by the fires of hell, some icy as Lethe
If surpassed by water drawn in vessels, sculpted by
the fallen hand of man
it cleanses in its place, but no further

5

Not so stricken waters: warm, or saline
but undiluted
Their streams are pure, to the final trickle

6

The wellspring, clean as on the day the Divine
word
cleft the waters, is unsurpassed
The leper and venereal, cast out of the city
encountering the water; repent, ponder
the endless aquatic cycle, sin and forgiveness
unending

We are not free to leave
until the cycle is broken
Until the last soul
leaves the last body

The Length of Our Days

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*The following is one of the honorable mentions from our
2024 Short Story Contest.*

Autumn had arrived late and disappeared early.

The leaves had already fallen, and the branches
were bare on the roadside; everything was bleak
and brown and blustery. It was only November,
and the air already smelled of winter.

Everything ends, the landscape seemed to say.
Everything has already ended, he reminded it. *And
everything has just begun.*

Eli had learned to travel light. He'd switched
exclusively to e-books the year he'd traveled the
world as a digital nomad (a term his sister assured
him was exceptionally pretentious). The slim,
slightly battered volume in his backpack was an
exception. It was stamped crookedly with a name
that was not his own. Between the cover and the
title page lay a note scrawled on a scrap of
looseleaf paper, in a handwriting that was also not
his own.

*God owns the world and all within it. In the
possession of Yitzy Segal.*

The spine was torn in one corner, and he could not
recall if he had received it like that or if the
damage had happened in his own possession.

**

The book in question had only resurfaced because
his parents were downsizing and needed him to
clear out his childhood bedroom.

Just throw it all away, he'd been tempted to tell
them. *There's nothing I need there anymore.* But it
wouldn't have been fair to leave the labor of it to

them, so he showed up with a couple of garbage bags and a cardboard box to dismantle the neglected shrine to the boy he had once been.

You would think he had been about twelve the last time he lived here, but in truth he simply hadn't cared enough about the room's décor to replace the basketball-themed lamps or the David Wright bobbleheads.

There wasn't much to sort through: old report cards in a box under his bed, tatty sneakers in the closet, dog-eared science fiction books he'd quickly consigned (though not without a pang of nostalgia) to the donation pile, bare shelves that once housed the *sefarim* he'd handed over years ago to his brother.

But as he reached up to scoop an armful of books and toss them into the donation box, he saw—between the shabby paperback covers and split spines—taller and slimmer than the other volumes, its cover embossed faux leather stamped with Hebrew letters—something that was not his to donate.

It had waited patiently for eight years between some truly awful Star Wars novel and a virtually shredded copy of *I, Robot* until the day that it would be returned to its rightful owner.

**

Yitzy pulled the book from the middle of a stack lying on the table.

"I was thinking about your question the other day. He has something interesting to say about it; I bookmarked it for you. Get it back to me whenever."

"I'm leaving for the summer tomorrow."

"Okay, then you can return it to me during the Fall semester."

**

He would not have chosen Yitzy as a *chavrusa* himself. He'd switched into the *shiur* mid-year, and everyone was already paired up. He didn't mind learning solo—sometimes he preferred it—and he would have been content to wait it out had Rabbi Lowenstein not gotten involved. He did not usually involve himself in *chavrusa* pairings, so when he encouraged Eli to learn with Yitzy, with his seemingly pseudo-*yeshivish* habits, turns of phrase, and mode of dress, he couldn't help wondering if there was a reason for it, if the rabbi sensed something in Eli, some less-than-perfect devotion, and was trying to set him back on the straight and narrow path.

Because, the truth of it was, he had been drifting since he returned from yeshiva in Israel. He would be sitting in the study hall, just at the edge of a breakthrough, some Talmudic concept suddenly clear in front of his eyes, he would feel the adrenaline of discovery thrilling through him, and then as it drained something would shift, and he would wonder why he was sitting there dissecting

the arguments of sixth century rabbis. Or he would be standing after silent prayer, and everything was quiet and still, and he could hear but the barest whispering and the see just the slightest swaying, and he would see, in some people's faces, something private and sacred, something that wasn't usually there, and their devotion was suddenly foreign to him.

He was quiet, clean-cut and disciplined; he even enjoyed learning. He had some unorthodox opinions, he had some questions, but who didn't? And it was nothing pressing; there was nothing in particular that shook his faith. But still he couldn't shake this sense he had of looking at familiar practices, and finding them suddenly strange in his eyes.

He did not know, at the time, about Yitzy's own strange and twisting path to Rabbi Lowenstein's *shiur*. It did not occur to him, at the time, that the institution that to him heralded the most vanilla of centrism could represent borderline heresy to others, and he did not realize that Rabbi Lowenstein had paired the two of them not because he could sense some inner rot in Eli, but because he accepted his outward facade of stability and normalcy.

So at the time, the suggestion had spooked him, and then he'd written that decidedly uncharitable piece about Rabbi Lowenstein in the student newspaper. That should have closed off his relationship with the rabbi forever, but instead it kickstarted it.

Yitzy turned out to be a surprisingly well-matched *chavrusa*, and it was through him that he developed a grudging respect for Rabbi Lowenstein, though he had been determined (he still could not entirely say why) to be unimpressed with the man.

**

Eli liked public transit.

He'd tried explaining, more than once, how public transit reflected the soul of a city, how he delighted in the instincts he'd developed from travel, like the way you could tell which direction the train was coming from based on the direction people faced on the platform.

He'd enjoyed exploring the transportation options in every city in every country he had traveled to. Some of his best pieces had been born of discussions and observations from train rides in Europe and overnight buses in Thailand.

He had yet to meet anyone who was impressed with his excitement, but, suburban boy that he was, he embraced public transit with an immigrant's enthusiasm.

So he was content to sit and wait for his stop, watching idly out the window even in these semi-familiar roads, observing the landscape and reading text off the side of passing trucks.

The bus approaching from the opposite direction

belonged to the same bus company as the one he was on. As it approached, he realized, with a slight jolt, that it was the same number bus as well. There was something slightly surreal about it, like viewing an alternate version of his own bus, and he half-expected to see a version of himself through the dirty windows as the other bus lumbered past, wheels spraying water droplets, but instead it was — unexpectedly — empty.

**

Eli had a complicated relationship with his past, which he wore, in turns, as a mark of shame and a badge of honor. In truth, there were two pasts he had to contend with: the one he had experienced and the one that people invented for him, woven from a patchwork of a dozen newspaper articles, films, and memoirs—the past that made him an exotic curiosity and a lightning rod for prying questions, but which had been, above all, ordinary.

It was true that there had been no greasy diner meals, no beers in the backs of trucks, no awkward prom photos or Friday night football games. Instead there had been canned beans for the road, Hebrew prayers from a pocket-sized prayer book... and little league and basketball practice, robotics club and APs, proficiency in Aramaic and Hebrew and a pre-law degree that he didn't use. He'd lasted one year in Rabbi Lowenstein's *shiur* before transferring colleges and telling himself he'd leave that world behind forever.

He'd had a few names, too, cycling back and forth between EE-lie and EH-lee as he remade himself anew as a different person, sometimes trying to pretend he had always been normal, at other times his whole identity hinging on the yeshiva boy he had once been.

Back when he was in yeshiva in Israel, there had been a guy in his year who could be found, during mealtimes, with a book of Bialik's poetry. It was a paperback volume with a cracked spine, the cover reattached with tape, that he had either read to death or picked up second-hand. He said it gave him insight into the Volozhin experience.

Eli had asked him once: What did Bialik have to tell *him* about the yeshiva experience? Wasn't he living it?

"Perspective," he'd said with a grin. "And nostalgia. You can't be nostalgic for something you're still experiencing."

The first semester after he'd transferred, Eli had picked up a volume of Bialik's poetry, but it hadn't really spoken to him.

**

Eli stood in front of Rabbi Lowenstein's door. The last time he had been there he'd come to apologize. He'd never actually intended to ask the rabbi's advice. He didn't even know what he wanted to ask him—every time he thought too

hard about it all his specific questions flew out of his mind and left behind just a vague sense of uneasiness. But when he was around people who cared about it all, who really believed in it all, then he did, too—or he wanted to tear his hair out at their willful blindness. It was what made being Yitzy’s chavrusa both infuriating and elating.

He knocked, and the rabbi beckoned him inside. He was sitting at his desk, an open book in front of him, making small marks in the margins and jotting down notes on a piece of paper. When Eli walked in he smiled.

“It was an unexpected privilege for us all that you joined us for Shabbos.”

“That’s why I came, actually. I... uh... wanted to thank Rebbe for his answer Friday night. It was... helpful.”

“I’m glad.”

“Actually.” He paused. “A follow-up...” He could think of nothing. “Why does it... why does it matter? All of it?” He spread his hands wide, gesturing at the rabbi’s shelves, full to bursting with codes of Jewish law and compendia of Jewish thought. “Everything we do, can it really all matter?”

The rabbi looked surprised, like it wasn’t the question he expected. He leaned forward. “It matters because... if all this...” he waved his hands towards the same shelves. “If all this is truly the will of God... then there is nothing—there can be

nothing—that is more important. Maybe nothing that could matter at all.”

He kept speaking, and Eli could not help but think that he had not been entirely wrong in that newspaper article. Perhaps “archaic” had been the wrong word. No, the rabbi was a modern man. His education, ironically, had been more or less the same as Eli’s, though a fair few decades apart. But there was something... ancient in him—some strange fire that burned behind his eyes, hiding behind the sleekness of his glasses and the trimness of his beard, behind a self-deprecating smile and a tendency to reference classic Russian literature. Beneath that careful, controlled intellectualism was some restrained form of the delirious Hasidic spiritualism that was supposed to be so alien to the rabbi. Eli wondered if that flame reflected in his own eyes.

For a while it had been enough, that reflected flame, enough to keep him warm, to fuel his religious devotion for another year, but it had not been enough to kindle a flame of his own. People asked him why he left, and they always expected a moment of revelation, or anti-revelation, but instead there had been just a slow, sad unraveling.

In the last week of his partnership with Yitzy, they had been discussing the theoretical underpinnings of despair and its relationship with lost objects.

When does an item truly pass out of your possession? When you despair of finding it. But

what if you give up on it and then discover it's been in your house all along? Alternatively, can you still own an item that's lost in the depths of the sea, so long as you have every confidence in its return?

In other words, when did an item go from being simply misplaced to truly lost?

"I saw an interesting comment about that recently." Yitzy tapped his fingers against the tabletop. "I'm not entirely sure where. I'll check a few *sefarim* over the weekend and bring it over."

**

It was dark when he stepped off the bus.

Yitzy's apartment door was adorned with a welcome mat, a potted plant, an artsy-looking *mezuzah*, and a wooden plaque that said "Segal Family" in Hebrew.

Eli knocked firmly, unexpected anticipation pooling in his gut as the door opened, first a crack, and then wider, the light from behind doing little to illuminate the familiar face that appeared in front of him.

Yitzy did not look surprised. This was not a surprise visit, though an unexpected knock on the door would have been much more dramatic.

He hadn't thought that people changed much in appearance at their age, but eight years will show

on anyone's face when it appears on it all at once. Yitzy had also grown a beard, and there was a child clinging to his leg, trailing a blanket and a ragged-looking stuffed toy. Eli had missed Yitzy's wedding, though his parents had received an invitation on his behalf.

A smile split his face. "Eli! Wow, come in, it's great to see you after all this time."

I didn't give up on you after all this time is what Eli heard, so to forestall any wrong assumptions, he blurted out, "I'm not a *ba'al teshuvah*."

I'm not here to repent; I just stopped by to return a book.

Yitzy paused, as if considering his words. But he just said, "I know. I read your articles." He beckoned him over to a table and poured two glasses of water. "I liked the one about self-publishing. I thought about sending you an email about it but, well, you know, I didn't."

Eli knew why. Because it was weird to reach out after so long. Because Eli had left their world and hadn't looked back. Or maybe he'd been looking back all along, walking awkwardly through life with his neck craned over his shoulder.

Even now, they left all their unsaid questions between them. *Why did you leave*, Yitzy did not ask. *And why bother to show up now?*

And Eli did not ask, *Do you find meaning in this*

life? Could I have?

Instead he spoke about his travels and his writing and asked about Yitzy's children. There were two of them, and he was obviously very proud of them despite trying not to be overly effusive. They even reminisced a little about their old yeshiva days, carefully dancing around Eli's abrupt departure.

"You know," Yitzy said. "You're still the best *chavrusa* I ever had."

Eli snorted. "I dread to think what your others have been like."

He checked his watch surreptitiously. Time had passed surprisingly quickly. If he didn't head out soon, he would miss the last bus out.

"Actually, the real reason I came was to return this." He handed the book to Yitzy. "I'm sorry I didn't return it earlier. It was at my parents' house all this time."

Yitzy's eyebrows rose. He spun the book around on the table, sliding it back towards Eli.

"It's not mine."

Eli flipped the front cover open. "It has your name on it. You lent it to me eight years ago, remember? We were learning *ye'ush* at the time."

Yitzy nodded. "It *was* mine, eight years ago. But I gave up on it. It became yours ages ago. Keep it."

"What for? It's been gathering dust at my parents' all these years."

Yitzy shrugged. "You can donate it... throw it out if you must. But it's not mine anymore."

**

Eli waited underneath the bus stop's dripping overhang, pacing for warmth, watching the headlights streaming past. His bus was delayed, and his phone battery was running low, so he couldn't use it to read. He reached into his backpack, laughing quietly to himself, and cracked open the slim Hebrew book, slowly parsing paragraphs by the dim glow of the streetlamps. It was not as if he had anything better to do.

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