



Tazria/HaHodesh

Selective Memory: Choosing Productive Narratives

The biblical appeal to remember thus has little to do with curiosity about the past. Israel is told only that it must be a kingdom of priests and a holy people; nowhere is it suggested that it become a nation of historians. p. 10

1. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zakhor, pp. 7-9

“We (ourselves) are periodically aware that memory is among the most fragile and capricious of our faculties. Yet the Hebrew Bible seems to have no hesitations in commanding memory. Its injunctions to remember are unconditional, and even when not commanded, remembrance is always pivotal. Altogether the verb zakhar appears in its various declensions in the Bible no less than one hundred and sixty-nine times, usually with either Israel or God as the subject, for memory is incumbent upon both. The verb is complemented by its obverse—forgetting. As Israel is enjoined to remember, so is it adjured not to forget. Both imperatives have resounded with enduring effect among the Jews since biblical times. Indeed, in trying to understand the survival of a people that has spent most of its life in global dispersion, I would submit that the history of its memory, largely neglected and yet to be written, may prove to be of some consequence.

p9 Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people.

2. Talmud Niddah 31a

R. Simeon b. Yohai was asked by his disciples: Why did the Torah ordain that a woman after childbirth should bring a sacrifice? He replied: When she kneels in bearing she swears impetuously that she will have no intercourse with her husband. The Torah, therefore, ordained that she should bring a sacrifice. (R. Joseph demurred: Does she not²¹ act presumptuously²² in which case the absolution of the oath²³ depends on her regretting it?²⁴ Furthermore, she should²⁵ have brought a sacrifice prescribed for an oath!)²⁶ And why did the Torah ordain that in the case of a male [the woman is clean] after seven days and in that of a female after fourteen days? [On the birth of a] male with whom all rejoice she regrets her oath after seven days, [but on the birth of a female] about whom everybody is upset she regrets her oath after fourteen days. And why did the Torah ordain circumcision on the eighth day?²⁷ In order that the guests²⁸ shall not enjoy themselves²⁹ while his father and mother are not in the mood for it.³⁰

שאלו תלמידיו את רבי שמעון בן יוחי
מפני מה אמרה תורה יולדת מביאה קרבן
אמר להן
בשעה שכורעת לילד קופצת ונשבעת שלא
תזקק לבעלה
לפיכך אמרה תורה תביא קרבן
מתקיף לה רב יוסף
והא מזידה היא ובחרטה תליא מילתא
ועוד קרבן שבועה בעי איתויי
ומפני מה אמרה תורה זכר לשבעה ונקבה
לארבעה עשר
זכר שהכל שמחים בו מתחרטת לשבעה
נקבה שהכל עצבים בה מתחרטת לארבעה
עשר