

Yom Kippur 5774
September 14, 2013

I recently became declared not of this era. The radio station I usually have on in the car subtly changed its tag line. “The best of the ‘80’s, ‘90’s, and today” became simply “The ‘90’s to today.” They still play a few 80’s era hits -- John Cougar Mellencamp, Brian Adams – but they are now few and far between. In other words, the era in which I came of age is now officially considered “oldies.” Hard to swallow. Because it means that my memories are deemed less culturally significant. For, for most of us, from teenagers on up, just a few bars of a song can evoke nostalgia for a certain place or time like little else can. And now this change in my station’s format is not only depressing, it is also a health risk. A New York Times article of this past year by John Tierney described the results of a scientific study that nostalgia is actually good for you.

That may not seem so interesting. After all, nostalgia generally means recalling memories that make us happy. What could be bad? But it turns out that doctors have classified nostalgia as a disorder for over 300 years. The Swiss physician who invented the term in 1688 called it “a neurological disease of essentially demonic cause.” The word itself means “the pain of longing for home” in Greek. But when a psychologist in England – Constantine Sedikides -- a transplant from the University of North Carolina – was told that he must be depressed because he was frequently feeling nostalgia for Tar Heels games and fried okra, he just didn’t buy it. This led to years of research which confirmed that nostalgia can make you feel better in bad situations and even make you physically warmer. This suggests that, far from a disorder, the urge to nostalgia is a positive evolutionary adaptation.

This is important for us as Jews because, in some ways, nostalgia is central to our prayers and sacred texts. Later today we will recite the Avodah service, the elaborate recreation of the Yom Kippur rite in the Second Temple. After the Hazzan acts out the service of old, we say Ashrei ayin ra'atah kol eleh, "Blessed were those who saw such things!"

Our God and God of our ancestors, it is known to You and revealed before Your throne of glory that we have no leader as we did in the days of old, no Kohen Gadol to offer a sweet savor, and no prophetess to sing over living and purifying waters. And so we have recalled what the ancients did.

The message is: Yom Kippur services are powerful now, but it's not like it was. This is the side of nostalgia which gives it a bad name. It is comparing the past to the present, and implying the past was better. The fact is, if one delves into the history of the Second Temple, one finds corruption, bitter conflicts, and a high priesthood rooted more in politics than holiness. We can hear this kind of questionable historical memory in the statement of the Rabbis: "Anyone who never saw Herod's Temple has never seen a beautiful building!" It is beyond question that the Temple as renovated by Herod was beautiful, but Herod himself was murderous and paranoid. The Rabbis convince themselves that his building it was an act of teshuvah. How can this kind of sanitized memory be helpful?

The answer is in what purpose nostalgia serves. Dr. Sedikides says that nostalgia *is* bad if it only compares the past to the present, but it is good if it helps us live in the here and now. It turns out, he says, that "when people speak wistfully of the past, they typically become more optimistic and inspired about the future." This is the catch.

Nostalgia is good for us only if we use it to feel better in our present, and gain more hope for our future.

It turns out that nostalgia is a universal emotion. And these scientists discovered that across cultures many of the topics are the same: “reminiscences about friends and family members, holidays, weddings, songs, sunsets, lakes. The stories tend to feature the self as the protagonist surrounded by close friends.” This increases your sense of self-worth in the present, especially if you are confronting a difficult time or depressing problem. Faced with an article saying that a human being’s life is “paltry, pathetic, and pointless,” subjects in the study tended to nostalgize, and it made them feel better. The study determined that nostalgic stories often begin with a negative event that then gets resolved thanks to help from someone close to you. This kind of memory creates a greater sense of belonging, and makes you more open and generous to outsiders. One might think that the inherent comparison of the past to the present might increase one’s sense of loss and dislocation, especially among the elderly. In fact, nostalgic memories do exactly the opposite, making people feel loved, and that their lives are meaningful in the here and now.

I believe that this is what Jewish texts try to do. Jewish tradition conceives of our past as a harbinger of the future. The Avodah service ends not with the lingering image of a glory no longer attainable, but rather with words for the here and now. The Orthodox prayer book contains a piyyut saying: *titen aharit l’amekha, tashiv mikdash l’tokhenu*: “Grant a happy ending to Your people, restore the Temple among us.” In our Mahzor Lev Shalem, we follow the declaration that we no longer have the beauty of old with the declaration, *aval z’khitanu b’avodah aheret*, “But You have granted us other

ways to serve You.” Then we remind ourselves that the Rabbis said that *g’milut hasadim*, acts of loving kindness, are as suitable a way of gaining atonement as the Temple service. Thus we end not with what we can no longer do but with what we can do. Indeed, the performance of such acts is what we dedicate ourselves to in the coming year.

How can we use this information in our lives? First of all, Dr. Sedikides says he tries not to lose opportunities to create “nostalgic-to-be” moments. He refers to this as “anticipatory nostalgia.” In other words, your positive memories should encourage you to make more such memories. That means, take that trip even if it’s hard to swing financially, and find a way to spend time with your children or your friends even if many obligations beckon. Second of all, Sedikides says that when he needs a lift or extra motivation, he consciously draws on his “nostalgic repository.” He savors memories, but (this is the hard part) while trying *not* to compare them to his current life or anything else. This means that, far from dismissing nostalgia as immaterial or unhelpful, we should use our instinct toward it to help us get through a rough patch or a bad day. Our memories can remind us that our lives have meant something, and consequently, that they still do.

In a few moments, we will recite Yizkor. Remembering our loved ones often brings up nostalgic feelings, but we know there is also profound sadness. But even here our nostalgia can still help us. The NYT article says: “Nostalgia does have its painful side — it’s a bittersweet emotion — but the net effect is to make life seem more meaningful and death less frightening.” Let us open ourselves up to some nostalgia in these quiet moments. We can then store up those bittersweet memories for the year to come, to give us our sense of self-worth when it might be flagging and to open us up to

others in moments we feel about to shut down. May this be a year of using our memories of long ago to inform our present, and of storing up “nostalgic to be” memories as we look towards the future.

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