

**Parashat Bo:
When Our Memory Cards Are Useful (& When They Aren't)**

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Dear Friends,

This week we leave Egypt!!

Rashi says that the Torah should have begun with parashat Bo and not with Bereishit, because the Exodus marks the true, significant beginning of the Jewish story. Everything that happened prior to it was only an introduction.

The story begins with a very new commandment. It may seem logical and banal to us; so much so that we hardly notice its existence. But this commandment makes its first appearance here, and it is not to be taken for granted, though it can be very problematic.

We are commanded to remember!

It begins with the command to Bnei Yisrael to mark their doorways with blood, a sign which will eventually take on the form of a mezuzah:

*"This day shall be to you one of **remembrance**: you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time."*
(Sh'mot 12)

The commandment to remember appears again in the mitzvah of tefillin, which also makes its first appearance in this parasha: *"And Moses said to the people, **'Remember** this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how the LORD freed you from it with a mighty hand... And you shall explain to your son... 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I went free from Egypt.'...And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a **reminder** on your forehead..."*
(Sh'mot 13)

The Torah does not often ask us to remember, so when we *are* commanded to remember, it is important that we listen.

From this point onwards there will be only five more things that the Torah commands us to remember:

- *"Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy."* (Sh'mot 20:7)

- *"Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear."*
D'varim 25:17
- *"Remember the long way that the LORD your God has made you travel in the wilderness these past forty years, that He might test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts..."* (D'varim 8:2)
- *"Remember, never forget, how you provoked the LORD your God to anger in the wilderness: from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you reached this place, you have continued defiant toward the LORD."* (D'varim 9:7). (This relates to the sin of the golden calf).
- *Remember what the LORD your God did to Miriam on the journey after you left Egypt.* (D'varim 24:9). (This relates to gossip and slander).

Memory... On the one hand it is a commandment, on the other hand, memory is also very tricky.

It is hard to quantify just how much of our life is generated from stored memory, and how much comes from in-the-present, immediate experience. My guess is at least 99% is the former and that only one percent, at most, is spent entirely in the present.

Take driving as an example. Anyone who has learned to drive and remembers the experience most likely also remembers how difficult it is to be consciously attentive to so many different critical actions at the same time. It is an experience of tremendous overload. With experience we get to store information into our internal "memory card", freeing us from this overload. At this point driving becomes automatic and our memory card does most of the driving.

This memory card is an essential part of our existence and sanity.

I am curious though, when does memory storage begin - is it with birth? perhaps in the womb? or maybe even before conception? Furthermore, when is collective memory added to the memory card? At kindergarten? primary school? or... maybe way before? Regardless, with time more and more of our actions are generated from our memory and fewer and fewer are truly conscious. At some point our life starts looking like Pavlovian conditioning.

The notion of living on autopilot can be shocking and it raises many questions: How fully do we truly live our lives? How free are we to change our responses to any given situation at any given time? How much do free will and freedom truly guide our lives?

Parashat Bo, the parasha of freedom from slavery and tyranny, brings with it the mitzvah of remembering, which is, in a way, another form of slavery. The juxtaposition of these two ideas in this parasha begs for a new interpretation.

As we look at the list of memories we are commanded to perpetuate – Egypt, Shabbat, Amalek, the journey, the Golden Calf, gossip and slander – an interesting conclusion arises, which, as usual, is the exact opposite of what I previously thought: the commandment to remember is not meant to tell us to store these things in our memory cards, but rather to awaken us – at least at certain moments – from the continuous coma which habit puts us into. This is an attempt to awaken the automatic pilot and bring his (our) soul back into consciousness:

1. Remember that indeed, most of your life is spent on autopilot (Egypt), and that your default programming is to forget that your life is run by memory card. If you can remember just this, part of your consciousness will reawaken.
2. Remember to rest, let go, breathe (Shabbat). Remember that the world is actually perfect as it is and that you don't have to create and produce at all times. The world will survive without your business, even though your automatic inclination is to improve, fix, do, and change. This reminder will put things into proportion. It will remind you that you are part of a grand plan
3. Remember not to take advantage of those who are weaker than you, and remember not to hurt them (Amalek). Remember that you, too, were once weak and powerless. Human inclination is to seek more and more strength, accumulate more and more wealth, often at any cost. If you remember that relationships and compassion are much more important than material wealth, your life will have value, you will be happier, and most importantly, you will be freer.
4. Remember that your life journey – as difficult and exhausting as it is – has meaning and value (The Journey in the Wilderness). If you don't, you will feel tired, heavy, despairing. You will drag yourself from one problem to the next with the perpetual feeling of having been there and done that. You will then discover that growing and evolving is possible and desirable.
5. Remember that you attribute too much value to transient things (The Golden Calf). Possessions cannot redeem you, regardless of how much you accumulate.
6. Remember to avoid slander and gossip (Miriam). Our default is to criticize others and ourselves, to highlight that which does not work, which is defective. If you remember that, the quality of your life will soar. And another thing – that juicy information about another person has no value whatsoever. It is poisonous. So is the gossip that others bring to you.

Parashat Bo reminds us that even though we cannot live an entirely conscious life, because that would be overwhelming, and while 99 percent can and should be stored onto our memory card, there are things that require our awakened attention. This one percent will determine the quality and virtue of our lives.

This one percent, though, requires free will.

With this one percent of consciousness that we are allotted, we will be worthy of being called human!

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha