

**Parshat Vayeshev**  
**Forgetting to Remember and Remembering to Forget**  
**Miriam Lorie - Class of 2024**

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To-do lists, post-it notes, phone alarm reminders: all these are things that have helped me remember things this week. My capacity to forget without these aides (and sometimes even with them) is impressive. But memory is a complex thing and, fallible as memory is, forgetting is not always simply an absence of memory. Sometimes, as we'll see, forgetting has an important positive role to play in our inner lives.

I know I'm not alone in forgetting things, and have company in this week's *parsha*. Pharaoh's chief cupbearer, imprisoned with Yosef, is implored by Yosef as follows:

כִּי אִם-זָכַרְתָּנִי אֶתְּךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִטֵּב לְךָ וְעָשִׂיתָ-נָא עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְהִזְכַּרְתָּנִי אֶל-פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵאתָנִי מִן-הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה

But remember me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place.

*Bereishit 40:14*

Yosef, here at his lowest point ("poor poor Joseph, locked up in a cell"), has a tenacious idea for escape. Twice (see bolded Hebrew) he asks the cupbearer to remember him, hoping perhaps that he will be offered a job in Pharaoh's staff.

A little later in the story, we read that Yosef's plan has come to naught:

וְלֹא-זָכַר שְׂרֵה־הַמְשָׁקִים אֶת-יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁכַּח:

Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.

*Bereishit 40:23*

Our commentators are interested in the double language in this verse. What does it mean to "not remember," and also "to forget"? For Rashi and Rashbam, this is about both short-term and long term memory lapse. For Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni, the first "*zachar*" means "mention." The cupbearer didn't mention Yosef to Pharaoh, and *therefore* he forgot him. This ties into a long Jewish tradition of learning by speaking out loud:

תַּלְמִיד אֶחָד הָיָה לְרַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר שֶׁהָיָה שׁוֹנֵה בְּלַחַשׁ, לְאַחַר שְׁלֹשׁ שָׁנִים שָׁכַח תַּלְמוּדוֹ

"Rabbi Eliezer had a student who would study quietly, and after three years he forgot all his studies."

*Eruvin 54a*

Not speaking yields forgetting.

The Midrash in Bereishit Rabbah 88:7 has the following beautiful image:

כָּל הַיּוֹם הָיָה מְתַנֶּה תְּנָאִים וּמְלַאךְ בָּא וְהוֹפְכֵן, וְקוֹשֵׁר קֶשְׁרִים, וּמְלַאךְ בָּא וּמְתִירָן. אָמַר לוֹ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת שׁוֹכְחוֹ וְאֲנִי לֹא אֶשְׁכַּחֵהוּ.

All day the cupbearer made mental notes, but an angel came and erased them. All day the cupbearer tied knots to remind himself, but an angel came and loosened them. Said God: You may forget him, but I will not!

I appreciate this read, which allows for the cupbearer's good intentions, and which feels so very relatable. I'm sure there's an angel who erases my mental notes too. And I also love how in human forgetting, the midrash makes space for the true Rememberer, God, to come onto the scene when the time is just right.

This isn't the end of the cupbearer's story, as two years later, his memory is finally awakened. Pharaoh has a dream which cannot be interpreted and the cupbearer finally remembers Yosef. I think the cupbearer's words here (which happen to be favourite Yeshiva student words for admitting to wrongdoing to this day) could in fact be a clue to his earlier forgetting:

אֶת־הַטָּאִי אֲנִי מִזְכִּיר הַיּוֹם

I must recall my faults this day.  
*Bereishit 41:9*

Before he can mention Yosef, the dream-interpreter sitting in prison, the cupbearer has an urgent recall of memory. He tells Pharaoh of his past misdemeanours, of his time in prison, of the baker who was executed and their two dreams correctly interpreted. I can imagine Pharaoh batting the introduction away– he is only interested in hearing about this talented dream interpreter, after all. But from the cupbearer's perspective, it feels like a sudden outpouring of traumatic memory, not unlike the survivors who have lived into our times who kept silent for years, but once they started speaking, could not stop. The word הַטָּאִי "faults" seems unexpectedly negative in this context. I read it as "nightmares." The cupbearer has unstopped a bottle of his worst memories, including incarceration and the death of his close colleague.

Read in this light, perhaps the cupbearer did not remember Yosef because he *had to* forget. A psychiatrist friend and I were reflecting on the lockdowns recently. We could hardly believe or remember those days where we didn't go out, when we were nervous of getting too close to neighbours, where danger felt close. "Our capacity for forgetting trauma is immense," said my friend.

The Or HaChayim on *Bereishit 41:23* writes something similar: "Perhaps the Torah wrote וישכחו, he forgot him, in order to hint that this was a deliberate act of forgetting". This doesn't need to be read maliciously; sometimes a deliberate act of forgetting is necessary for healing.

The only issue here is that in the cupbearer's act of self-preservation, however subconscious it was, his forgetting came at the expense of Yosef, who languished in prison for two years longer than necessary. We know, with our reader's hindsight, that this was all part of God's plan for Yosef to emerge at the most opportune moment to prove his skills and insight to Pharaoh.

For us today, far from God's obvious providence, may we allow ourselves the forgetfulness that is sometimes necessary for self-preservation and healing, but may we be zealous when it comes to remembering others who need our help. Even when it takes to-do lists, post-it notes, and phone alarm reminders.



Miriam Lorie is from Borehamwood UK, where she lives with her husband and two small boys. She is the Rabbi in Training at Kehillat Nashira - the first orthodox British woman to hold a clergy role. Her love of Judaism has taken her to study at Midreshet Harova and the Pardes Centre for Jewish Educators. Miriam co-founded a local Partnership Minyan in 2013 - the first such minyan to regularly meet in the UK. She regularly leins, teaches and leads davening at this warm and open minyan, Kehillat Nashira. Miriam has worked at Lead, developing Jewish leaders for the UK Jewish community, where she collaborated with the London School of Jewish Studies to develop and run an online Jewish literacy course for community leaders. She has designed and led fellowships for emerging Jewish leaders and inter-faith leaders. Miriam trained with the Eden Centre as a kallah teacher.

Miriam was named one of the Jewish Chronicle's "Sixteen under 30's to watch in 2016" and in the Jewish News' "40 under 40" in 2020. Realising that Jewish teaching was a life calling, Miriam began the Yeshivat Maharat Beit Midrash Program in 2019, became a freelance Jewish educator in 2020, and began the Semikha programme later that year.