Never Forget?
Ilana Kurshan

In this week’s parashah, Va’etchanan, Moshe repeatedly warns the people of Israel that they must not forget the experience of revelation or the covenant at Sinai: “Take utmost care and do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes so that they do not fade from your mind for as long as you live” (4:9, see also 4:23). The Israelites must remember the experience of Sinai in its full intensity and convey that experience to their children, so that Torah remains alive in each generation and the climactic encounter with the divine retains its powerful hold. The ancient rabbis, drawing on this verse as proof text, issued stern injunctions against forgetting Torah, warning that “whoever forgets one word of his learning, it is accounted to him as if he were mortally guilty” (Avot 3:8). And yet as we all know, forgetting is an inevitable part of learning, and every subsequent generation is further removed from the experience at Sinai. What then are we to make of Moshe’s repeated injunctions not to forget? Is forgetting necessarily a mark of failure?

Though the rabbis warn against the dangers of forgetting, they also recognize that to some extent it cannot be helped. Although the Talmudic sage Resh Lakish cautions that “anyone who forgets even one matter from his studies violates a negative commandment,” his words are qualified by Rabbi Dostai, who explains that this is only the case if a person willfully forgets his studies, and not if he is just struggling to remember (Menachot 99b). Rav Yosef adds that if a Torah scholar forgets his learning, we do not shame him but continue to treat him with respect, since after all the broken tablets, too, were placed in the ark besides the new set. The Talmud associates the broken tablets with forgetting, arguing that “had the tablets not been smashed, Torah would not have been forgotten from Israel” (Eruvin 54a). These sources suggest that forgetting Torah is a necessary evil, a byproduct of a particular historical moment that left its tragic mark on all subsequent generations.

And yet our tradition also contains other voices that recognize that forgetting Torah can in fact have positive value, and can deepen rather than dilute our learning. The midrash in Kohelet Rabbah (1:13) quotes various sages who argued that “it is for a person’s own good that he learns Torah and then forgets it, because if a person were to learn Torah and never forget, he would study Torah for two or three years and then go back to his work, and he would never invest his whole life in Torah.” Since we never remember everything we learn, we are able to spend our
whole lives learning. The rabbis relate that this is in fact the way that the wise King Solomon would study Torah – he would “empty himself like a vessel that is alternately filled and then emptied,” forgetting Torah so as to allow himself to learn it anew (Kohelet Rabbah 2:12). While this may seem like just another example of the vanity and futility that characterizes the book of Kohelet, perhaps the rabbis are trying to teach us a deeper lesson about the value of forgetting and re-learning.

As King Solomon and the rabbis surely realized, no two experiences of learning are the same. When we re-learn, we are not just restoring whatever it is that we have forgotten. A text will speak to us in different ways at different points in our lives, and with each subsequent encounter, we are likely to read the text differently and discover new insights. By forgetting and re-learning, we clear out any earlier biases, assumptions, or ways of thinking that might have once colored our perspective. In this sense, forgetting allows not just for more learning, but also for new learning. Perhaps this is what the Talmudic rabbis meant when they taught that “sometimes the abrogation of Torah is its foundation” (Menachot 99b), quoting as proof the verse in which God tells Moses to carve out new tablets to replace the ones he has broken (Exodus 34:1). The Talmud then cites a well-known midrash in which God commends Moshe with the words “yasher koach” for breaking the tablets, suggesting that something good came out of that brokenness. The midrash in Exodus Rabbah (46:1) adds that God told Moses not to feel bad about breaking the tablets, because the new set would contain not just the written Torah, but the Oral Torah as well. The shattering of the first set of tablets did not just result in a reality in which Torah is forgotten, but also allowed for the creation of new ways of learning.

Although Moshe cautions the people not to forget any aspect of the revelation at Sinai, he surely must have realized that it would be impossible for the people to remember everything. And even if they did not manage to remember it all, surely their children would begin to forget, or perhaps their children’s children. Today we are so far removed from the revelation at Sinai that we can at best try to imagine what it must have been like when “from the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you, on earth. He let you see His great fire, and from amidst that fire you heard His words” (Deuteronomy 4:36), as we read in this week’s parashah. And yet because the first set of tablets were shattered and because we forget, we have been given the Oral Torah – the corpus of halakhah, aggadah, midrash and talmud, in which generations of rabbis try to tease out the meaning of the text. This Torah is oral not just because it was at first not written down, but also because every generation is invited to add its own voices. When we learn and forget and learn again, we participate in an experience of revelation that is eternal, ensuring that the divine encounter at Sinai continues to reverberate and is never forgotten.
Are You Greater than God?
Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

This week we begin to read the section of Devarim that is concerned with mitzvot. We are studying its opening statement by Moshe:

**Text: Devarim 4:1-2**

1"Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers is giving you. 2You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor diminish from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.

- What is the incentive to keep the mitzvot, according to what Moshe says? How might keeping the mitzvot advance the goal that Moshe sets in v.1?

- Moshe warns not to add to the mitzvot. Why would one add to [the many] mitzvot that already exist? What could be the benefits and who benefits? What is the danger in such behavior? What do you suggest as a proper response? (Extra challenge: read 1 Kings 12, especially verses 25-33 on this topic.)

- Why might someone diminish or reduce the mitzvot? How should a community respond to such behavior? Can you think of any historic examples?

**Commentary: Ibn Ezra Devarim 4:2**

*You shall not add* - On your own; and think that it is in the service of God. You shall similarly not diminish.

- Ibn Ezra stresses that one might not add or diminish on one’s own. Is there anybody who might be allowed to do so for us?

- Why do you think that people may think that adding to the Mitzvot is a service to God?

**Commentary: Malbim Devarim 4:2**

*You shall not add* – The complete/perfect Things will not accept not an addition nor a reduction. Just as the body of an animal (for sacrificing) will not be called ‘perfectly complete’ unless there is no shortcoming nor any addition, and there is no blemish in it. So is the mitzvah of the LORD, whether the Torah in its entirety, or each mitzvah taken individually, one may not add to it nor reduce from it a thing; such as one would decide to add an extra holiday on one’s own volition, or have five sections in the tefillin (there are four) etc. And the reason to add an explanation “that you may keep the commandment of the LORD your God” is that they are the Mitzvot of the LORD who is complete in the ultimate completeness, and therefore one should not add nor reduce from them.

- Why, according to Malbim, is one not allowed to alter a mitzvah?

- Why do you think people might find this law counterintuitive or challenging to keep? How does this connect to Ibn Ezra’s comment?
Fragility and the Infinite
Bex Stern Rosenblatt

Comfort in Judaism is time-bound. We demarcate periods for comfort and periods for pain. We seek to impose on the natural world order and rationale. If we can provide time-bound limits for suffering and pain and time-bound limits for comfort and joy, we can feel as if we understand the world, understand God’s plan. In the words of Kohelet, “What has been is what will be and what has been done is what will be done.” Our time-bound periods of emotion cycle around again every year, allowing us every year to re-experience, relive what we lived before.

This year, as in every year, we enter now into the period of comfort, the seven weeks of consolation following Tisha B’Av. Our haftarah is the first of the seven haftarot of consolation. And it is beautiful. The words, the expressions, the images are exquisite. And yet there is something in the beauty itself that reminds us of the time-bound nature of comfort. Exquisite beauty can last only for a moment.

The first words we hear on this Shabbat Nachamu are “nachamu nachamu ami,” “comfort, comfort, my people.” God speaks to a group of people, perhaps a group of prophets, commanding them finally to comfort the long-suffering people that God at last acknowledges as God’s people. Twice they are called, twice commanded, to provide comfort. At this point, we have lost the first temple and gone into exile. We have been in a period of such severe pain that to enter a period of comfort takes two callings, two summonings out of our current emotional and perhaps even geographical state.

When the prophet asks for further clarification on how to provide this comfort, on what to call to the people, God tells him to say (as translated by Robert Alter):

“All flesh is grass and all its trust like the flowers of the field.
Grass dries up, the flower fades, for the LORD’s wind has blown upon it.
The people indeed is grass.
Grass dries up, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.”

He recalls to the people their impermanence, the transience of their bodies, their lives, their suffering. We are flowers, we ourselves are the exquisitely beautiful, existing for but a moment in time before we fade. But we are called to take comfort in the eternity of God. The prophet continues (as translated by Robert Alter):

“Do you not know, have you not heard? Was it not told to you from the first, have you not grasped how the earth was founded?”

We do know. We have a sense of time outside the cyclic. We have the story of the creation of the earth and we are in relationship with God who created it. Even as we live in moments of joy and moments of pain, repeated for the length of our lifespans, we are capable of imagining the infinite. As we enter these seven weeks set aside for consolation this year as we do every year, as we find beauty in our fragility, take time to attempt to understand what is beyond our bounded lives, to grasp how the earth was founded.