



## HA'AZINU

# Repression of the Sublime

It was advertised as one symposium at a major psychology conference. It was to be a discussion about memory and forgetfulness. But it turned out to be one of the most intense and instructive days that I have ever witnessed.

The first speaker began by insisting that the fact that we remember things is obvious. What requires explanation, he argued, is why we forget. We are hardwired to recall every event that occurs in our lives. The mechanisms of forgetfulness are a mystery and call for a program of scientific research.

The second speaker took a position diametrically opposed to the first. He believed that it is only natural that we forget. It is one of nature's wonders, he maintained, that we remember anything at all.

The third speaker took a middle of the road position. For him, the major challenge to the science of the

psychology of memory was not why we remember. Or why we forget. Rather, it was why we remember certain things and forget others. And why we distort even those matters which we do remember, so that our memories are grossly inaccurate and unreliable.

It is the position of this third speaker that has kept my interest over the many years since that conference. And it was just recently, as we commemorated the tragic events of September 11, 2001, that my interest in this subject was revived.

Very many of my acquaintances were on or near the scene of the collapsed World Trade Center Towers on that fateful day. To this day, some have clear recollections of every moment of their experiences. Others claim that they only remember certain vivid episodes, fleeting ones, and can only draw a blank when it comes to the majority of the time they were exposed to the tragic scene.

Some have memories which are as accurate and as clear as the "flashbulb memories" that psychologists have studied as far back as World War II. For others, the memories have been partially, and sometimes substantially, repressed and can no longer be recalled. Their powerful and poignant emotional reactions have wrought havoc with the ability to accurately remember

the events of that day.

Remembering and forgetting are major themes in our Jewish religious tradition. We are commanded, for example, to remember the Shabbat day, to remember the lessons to be drawn from the life of Miriam, and not to forget the enmity of Amalek. In this week's Torah portion, Parshat Ha'azinu, there are at least two verses which relate to these themes. One reads, "Remember the days of yore, understand the years of generation after generation." (D'varim 32:7) and the other states, "You ignored the Rock who gave birth to you, and forgot God who brought you forth." (32:18)

I have always been intrigued by the notion of forgetting God. Earlier in the book of D'varim, we were admonished to be careful, lest "our hearts become haughty, and we forget the Lord our God" (8:14). I can understand agnostic disbelief, and I can empathize with those who have lost their faith, but I have always found it puzzling to contemplate forgetting God. Either one believes, or one does not believe, but how are we to understand forgetting Him?

Many years ago, I came across the writings of a psychologist named Robert Desoille, and it was in those writings that I've discovered a concept that helped me come to grips with the notion of forgetting God.

Desoille coined the phrase "the repression of the sublime". He argued that we have long been familiar with the idea that we repress urges and memories that are uncomfortable or unpleasant. We repress memories of tragedy, we repress impulses which are shameful, or forbidden. It can even be argued that this power of repression is a beneficial one to individuals and society. If individuals would not be able to forget tragedy and loss, they could potentially be forever emotionally paralyzed and unable to move on with their lives. A society whose members act on every hostile impulse, rather than repressing them would be a society which could not endure for very long.

It was Desoille's insight that just as we repress negative memories, we also repress positive aspirations. We are afraid to excel. There is a pernicious aspect to us that fears superiority and avoids the full expression of our potential. This is especially true in the area of religion and spirituality, where we dare not express the full force of our faith and, in the process, limit our altruistic tendencies. Perhaps it is the dread of coming too close to the divine. Perhaps it is a false humility that prevents us from asserting our inner spirit. Or perhaps it is simply that we do not wish to appear "holier than thou" to our fellows.

However one understands the reasons for this phenomenon, for me, the concept of "repression of the sublime" explains the notion of forgetting God. It is as if we have faith in Him, do not have sufficient faith in ourselves to express our faith in him in our relationships and life circumstances. We repress our sublime potential.

There are many impediments to thorough personal change and self-improvement. Desoille demands that we consider an impediment that never before occurred to us: we are afraid to actualize the inner spiritual potential that we all possess. We are naturally complacent, satisfied with a limited expression of our religious urges. We repress the sublime within us.

As we now have concluded the High Holidays and its truly sublime liturgy, we have allowed our spiritual emotions full range. We have dared to express the religious feelings that welled up within us during the moments of inspiration that we all have surely experienced during this sacred season.

Now is the season during which our faith demands that we loosen the bonds of the repression which limits us, take the risks of more fully expressing our religious convictions, and thereby no longer be guilty of "forgetting the God who brought us

forth".

May we be successful in our efforts to free the sublime within us, to act courageously upon our religious convictions, and thereby merit the blessings of the Almighty for a happy and sweet new year. 🕯️