

# Remember

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The occasion that we now call Rosh Hashana, is referred to in the Bible only as *Zihron Teruah* – the Day of Remembering with Sound. One is bound to ask: “remembering what? And what does the sound of the Shofar have to do with it?”

The idea of remembering is repeated many times throughout the Torah. It figures prominently in three important specific cases. The first case is Shabbat. In Exodus it says, “**Remember** the Shabbat day to make it special... for God created the heavens and the earth in six days and rested on the seventh.” Then, in Deuteronomy, the Torah does not say remember but “**Keep** the Shabbat to make it special...to **remember** that you were slaves in the land of Egypt.” The difference between “remembering” and “keeping” is that “remembering” is more cerebral and emotional – even abstract. It’s the idea. “Keeping” means actively doing something to remind you. One without the other is not enough.

Remembering creation and remembering slavery amount to the same thing. In both cases, the physical world has its limitations and restrictions. But if one remembers these limitations, one can try to deal with them. Being in servitude means one is not free. And being in servitude to the material world, to work and technology, is also not being free.

The second case is Amalek. We are told in both Exodus and Deuteronomy to **remember** what Amalek did and, furthermore (and seemingly repetitively), not to forget. These two similar commands also combine the abstract idea of remembering what happened and taking steps to prevent a recurrence of avoiding the state of submission.

The Torah also repeats the command to blot out the memory of Amalek. In Exodus, it is God saying that God will do it. In Deuteronomy, that “you”, meaning us, must do it. Together, the combination of Divine forces of creation and history work to supplement our human proactivity. We need both.

The final example is Miriam where, quite out of the blue amongst a series of laws sandwiched in between leprosy and usury, the Torah commands us to remember what happened to Miriam on the journey out of Egypt. What happened to her? The only incident is one in which she and Aaron complained to Moses about his wife. For this, she was stricken with leprosy. This is the basis of saying that Miriam’s crime was gossip and that the punishment for gossip is

leprosy. Certainly not an empirical fact. Otherwise, far more of us would suffer from leprosy nowadays! The law that follows it is the law of lending for charity. The relevance of the use of “remember” in this context is to stress the importance of both being sensitive to other people by lending charitably and by not gossiping or humiliating others verbally.

What all this does is to emphasize that “to remember” is much more than just “to recollect”. It is a call to act. To be better more caring human beings as a result of what has happened – to us and our people. Which underlines the difference between memory and history. One is hot. The other is cold.

What does this have to do with Rosh Hashana? The Torah, in Leviticus, simply says that the festival at the start of the seventh month is a day of **Zihron** (“remembering”) and **Teruah** (the sound of the Shofar).

**Zihron** on Rosh Hashanah is clear: on a personal level, to remember what we have done well or badly this past year. To be woken, as we are told by Maimonides, from our sleep or laziness in order to do something about being better.

But **Zihron** also applies to us as a people. To remember where we came from, how we have survived and why. And then to do something radical to ensure that our people stay strong and spiritually inspired. We need the occasion to remind ourselves about the importance of memory. To remember that for all the criticisms and failures of the Jewish people and its divisions that we are bombarded with, we have survived to create a State that is successful technologically, secularly and at the same time religiously.

**Teruah**, the sound of the Shofar, is to wake us up physically – not just mentally. A shock to our system. But it also symbolizes history. It is the one item – the one artifact we have always used throughout our history – that was the same then, at the very start, as it is now. The same basic material that in itself is just raw matter. But can be blown by our breath to make sounds or alarm, sadness, and comfort. In the way that the Bible says that humans were made out of clay. But Divine breath turned the raw matter into something that has the potential for spirituality.

In theory and practice, memory works on a personal and national level. And that is the message of the festival. Nowadays, we might call it our “New Year”. A shofar call to start again. To make New Year resolutions. To remember creation. But it is more than that. For our nation, it is the day of our physical survival. Some like to say, “never again”. When we do, we act on

it, we mean it!