

Once, when I was in Israel, I was taken on a tour of the Technion. For those of you who aren't familiar, the Technion is Israel's premier science and technology university. On its large campus in Haifa, there was what amounts to an outdoor interactive science museum, where visitors could learn scientific principles outside of a classroom, through hands-on experiences.

One of the installations that has stuck with me over the years was a platform that demonstrated the true nature of a rainbow. By standing on an elevated platform surrounded by mist, a rainbow can be created that completely surrounds you. You see, a rainbow only appears to be an arc in the sky, with a beginning and an end. In reality, rainbows are complete circles, our limited perspective simply prevents us from seeing more than a fraction. Standing there, surrounded by those colors was an awe-inspiring experience.

What I didn't know then, that I do now, is that there was a blessing that I should have recited in that moment. This shouldn't be a surprise; our tradition loves blessings. We are instructed to recite a series of blessings when we wake up in the morning, and when we go to sleep. We are expected to recite a

blessing before we eat, and a longer list of blessings once we are satisfied. There are also blessings that we recite before traveling, and blessings when we arrive at certain natural wonders. There are blessings for seeing old friends, and blessings for seeing certain prominent people. There is a blessing for the new moon, and a blessing for the sun – but that one is only recited once every 28 years.

As we have journeyed through the High Holidays, one blessing has stuck with me throughout.

ברוך אתה ה' זוכר הברית

Baruch Atah HaShem, Zocher Ha-b'rit

Praised are you, God, who remembers the Covenant.

This blessing, **זוכר הברית**, marks the end of the Zichronot service on Rosh Hashanah, but it has its origins in what we are meant to say upon seeing a rainbow.

In the Talmud, an encounter with most natural phenomena – impressive sights of awe-inspiring events – should be marked with a blessing that marvels at the miracle of Creation and the power of God

However, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi suggested a different blessing for a rainbow. He proposed a blessing that draws our attention to God's destructive power. According to the Torah, a rainbow first appeared in the sky after God destroyed the world with a flood in the time of Noah. Noah and his family, the only survivors of that destruction, were afraid to return to the world and start the work of rebuilding. God established a covenant with Noah to reassure him that that such destruction would never be repeated; the rainbow in the sky would be a reminder of that promise. This is what we refer to when we praise God as the one who "remembers the Covenant."

What does it mean for God to remember the Covenant? This evokes for me a beautiful image. God is flipping through an old photo album that sat on the coffee table untouched for months or years. The page falls open to the moment of the covenant with Noah, and all those memories come rushing back. God smiles, remembering the possibilities that were open to the world on that day. God can't help but share that joy with the world, posting it publicly for everyone to see, hoping that the rainbow will bring back those memories for us, too.

But if God suddenly remembers the covenant, could it possibly mean that God had forgotten it? That for a while, maybe a brief moment or maybe some longer stretch, God forgot the promise not to destroy the world? And if that's the case, how can we be confident that the rainbow will reappear the next time that God forgets?

Or, perhaps the rainbow is meant to be a warning. God places a rainbow in the sky in moments where the world is particularly sinful. Moments when, if it were not for the covenant, God would have wiped us out again, or at least seriously considered it.

This possibility is given weight by a story that was told about our friend Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai – he was the one whom I discussed last week, who argued that if only one person merited to enter the World to Come, it was he. Well, according to this story, he was onto something. Rabbi Hezekiyah taught that throughout the lifetime of Shimon bar Yochai, there wasn't a single rainbow.

Shimon bar Yochai was so pious, so righteous, that God never once considered destroying the world as long as he was in it. It was only after he died that rainbows – and the risk that they imply – returned.

Or is it possible that the rainbow is meant to reassure us, that no matter how far we stray, God will never forget the covenant? We might fear that we have gone too far, but there is nothing that we can do that would provoke God's wrath to the point of destroying the world again. Even if we forget the covenant, even if we live our entire lives without thinking about it, God will never forget.

Three interpretations, each with a very different message for us today. While the idea that the rainbow reflects the moments when God remembers the covenant might be heartwarming, I find it theologically challenging. I reject the idea of a God who might forget, who doesn't remember everyone and everything at every moment.

Dr. David Kraemer, the librarian at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and my teacher, wrote:

In the Bible, God is described as remembering far more often than are humans. Memory is, primarily, a divine quality, representing God's ability to overcome the limitations of a particular time, to see the past as one segment of a far greater whole.

God cannot forget, remembering is part of what makes God, God.

I also have to reject the second interpretation – that the rainbow is meant to warn us – not because of what it says about God's nature, but because of what I know about human nature. If we are so sinful as to deserve destruction, then why would we be reined in by the knowledge that this destruction can never come. The rainbow in this perspective doesn't threaten us. indeed, it would demonstrate the opposite, instead of reminding us of God's ability to destroy the world, it would reflect God's impotent rage at the promise that prevents God from doing so.

I am left with the last possibility, that the rainbow and its blessing are meant to reassure us. We are the ones who are prone to forgetting. We are the ones who need to be reminded. We can so easily forget the covenants of our ancestors, and fear that we will be left alone. It is for us that God places the rainbow in the sky, so that we remember the promise that God made – God always remembers.

God does more than simply remember the Covenant. While Rabbi Yehoshua proposed that the blessing for a rainbow should be “Praised are you, God, who remembers the Covenant,” Rabbi Yishmael suggested that it should be “Praised are you, God, who is faithful to God’s Covenant, and fulfills God’s word.” For Rabbi Yishmael, the concern is not that God would forget the Covenant, but that God would decide not to uphold it. It is an ongoing act of love that leads God to continue to be bound by the promise made to Noah.

At the end of the day, the blessing that is handed down to us combines the two options. The blessing that we are instructed to recite when confronted with a rainbow is:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם זֹכֵר הַבְּרִית וְנֶאֱמַן
בְּבְרִיתוֹ וְקִים בְּמֵאֲמָרוֹ

*Baruch atah Ha-Shem, Elohezocher ha-b'rit v'ne'eman bivrito,
v'kayyam b'ma'amaro*

Praised is the One who remembers the covenant, and is faithful to the covenant, and who fulfills your word.

The rainbow reassures us that even when we forget, God remembers. I believe that the Yizkor service meets this same need. When someone we love dies, we cannot imagine a single moment when they are not in the forefront of our minds. But over time, minutes can pass without thinking of them. Eventually, minutes can turn into hours. Hours might lengthen into days.

Along with those stretches of time, can come guilt. How can we not remember them? How can we spend a single moment without thinking of how our lives are poorer without them? Yizkor is here to comfort us, to tell us that God remembers. In those moments when we are distracted, in those moments when we forget, God remembers. Over and over again,

as part of Unetaneh Tokef, we declare **ותזכור כל-הנשכחות**
v'tizkor kol-ha-nishkachot God will remember all the forgotten.

In fact, God's memory of those who are gone is more complete than ours could ever be. As I learned at the Technion a rainbow is created when a beam of light is shined through a prism, which separates it out into the colors we see. Each color is separate, and each is a necessary component of the rainbow, a piece of the original beam of light.

Each of us, and every person that has ever existed, is much the same. We are all unified beings, but we are made up of different attributes. Only certain parts of ourselves are visible at a time. Who I am as a brother is different than who I am as a father. Who I am as a rabbi is different than who I am as a spouse.

When we remember those we have lost, we can only remember the parts of their lives that we experienced. We can only see certain colors of their rainbow, and never understand exactly how they all fit together on the other side of the prism.

That is the role of God. God can remember every aspect of a person in isolation and all of them together, understanding how they fit into the unity of the individual.

There is also a lesson here for us today. I believe that prayer is meant to show us the work that needs to be done. When we voice a prayer, we take on the responsibility to strive to see it fulfilled. The rabbis taught us “Just as God clothes the naked, you must clothe the naked. Just as God visits the sick, you must visit the sick.” Yizkor is telling us that just as God remembers those who are gone, we must remember.

This is an important role for a synagogue community. On the wall behind you are 227 names. Some of the people memorialized on that wall were members of our community, many were not. The named go all the way back to Philip Feinstein, פנחס בן כתריאל – *Pinchas ben Katriel* – who died on April 6th, 1909, nearly half a century before the PJC was established. No one here could have known him personally. He could not have known that community such as ours would exist here one day, with his name on the wall. He could not have

imagined that, more than a century after his death, I would be standing here, calling out his name. And yet, here we are.

This spring, when his *yahrzeit* comes up, I will call out his name again, and we as a community will remember him. This is our responsibility as a **קהילה קדושה** *kehillah kedoshah* a holy community. We remember those who would otherwise be forgotten, because God remembers.

This is why I am going to extend an invitation to everyone who is here. Stay. Even if you are blessed to have no one in your life for whom you will say Yizkor or Kaddish, stay. All of the names from our memorial boards are recorded in the back of the Yizkor book; choose one, or more than one, and imagine what their life must have been, what they must have meant for someone to choose to permanently inscribe their name on the wall of our sanctuary.

If it is your practice not to stay in the sanctuary during Yizkor, then I ask that as you leave you take note of the names on the boards flanking the doors. Take a moment outside of the sanctuary to remember them, whether or not you knew them. Just as God remembers, so, too, will we.