VaEira/Tetzaveh 5780

"Spiced Wine and Vinegar": Remembering Amalek and Living our Lives

Dr Esther Jilovsky

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles

The pale yellow folder stares up at me from the bottom of the cardboard box, its rounded corners bent with age. I've never seen it before, but the handwriting scrawled across the front in blue ballpoint pen strikes me with a jolt. The curly cursive spells out three distinct words in German: "Meine goldene Mama". Three simple words: "My golden mother" or "my wonderful Mum." A phrase that communicates absolute adoration, longing, love. And the writing scribbled across the front, the handwriting I recognise instantly, though I have not set eyes upon it for over a decade. It's the unmistakeable hand of my Grandpa, of blessed memory. My hands shake as I lift the folder from the box. I flip it open and pages flutter out, some as thin as tissue paper, others a little thicker. Some typed in a square black typeface, others handwritten in slanted indigo ink. German words jump out at me: "Mein lieber Junge!" "deinen Brief" „deine Mutti". "My dear boy!" "Your letter" "your mother". And the dates. January. May. November. 1939, 1940, 1941. I cannot believe my eyes. Seconds pass before I realise that my own trembling hands hold letters from my great-grandparents who perished in the Shoah.

Memory runs through Jewish tradition like the פתיל תכלת, the blue thread, weaves through a tallit. It is an integral part of the whole, which would be irrevocably changed without it. In our daily liturgy, we remember God's miracle of parting the sea in *MiChamocha*. In the Ten Commandments, God instructs us to *Zachor et Yom haShabbat l'kodsho*, to "Remember the day of

Shabbat and sanctify it."[1] In the Shabbat Kiddush, we recite that resting on the seventh day reminds us of the seven days of creation, and recall that Shabbat is a זכר ליציאת מצריים, a remembrance of our Exodus from Egypt. The Hebrew root for "remember" זכר, zayin, chaf, resh, also entitles our Yizkor services, held on Yom Kippur, Sh'meini Atzeret, seventh day Pesach and Shavuot, to remember those who we have lost. Remembrance runs through our yearly cycle of holidays and Torah readings, recalling happy, positive events, such as redemption from Egypt and celebrating Shabbat, our day of rest, as well as events of destruction, loss and sadness.

As we approach Purim, Jewish tradition holds us between devastation and celebration. This coming Shabbat, the Shabbat before Purim, we observe Shabbat Zachor, our shabbat of remembrance. We read from Deuteronomy:

זָכֹור אֵת אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה לְךָ עֲמָלֵק בַּדֶּרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם

"Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt."[2] Remember that there are those who want to hurt you, to destroy you, remember the attacks, remember the suffering, remember the pain. And then we read:

תִּמְחֶה אֶת־זֵכֶר עֲמָלֵק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמָיִם לֹא תִּשְׁכָּח

"Blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!"[3] Here we are told not to forget to completely erase the memory of Amalek. Instead of זָכֹור "remember" as in the earlier verse, here the command is לֹא תִּשְׁכָּח "do not forget". Medieval commentator Ibn Ezra explains that לֹא תִּשְׁכָּח "do not forget" emphasises the command "remember." The command "do not forget" sounds stronger, more like a reprimand than a polite request to remember. These

[1] Exodus 20:8
[2] Deuteronomy 25:17
[3] Deuteronomy 25:19

verses illustrate a tension between remembering tragedy, remembering our arch enemy, and forgetting his name, forgetting the terrible things that have taken place. There's a similar ambivalence about remembering the Shoah. What happened is so very horrible that remembering it is painful, even if it didn't happen to us directly.

My Grandpa's letters tell a heartbreaking story. As far as I know, they are the last sign of life from my great-grandparents, Gabriel and Elsa Jilovsky. In early 1939, my Grandpa Kurt Jilovsky was working in the Netherlands. He'd left Prague, where he'd grown up, and moved to Eindhoven for a job. This much I knew. His parents remained in Czechoslovakia, and they wrote to him regularly from their home in Prague. Grandpa had always told us that at some point, he decided to get out of Europe. He witnessed the horrific reality of the Nazi dictatorship and he decided to leave. He travelled back to Prague, said goodbye to his parents, and caught the last train out of Czechoslovakia before the Nazis closed the borders in March 1939.

He never saw his parents again.

These letters form a time capsule. They provide a snapshot of my great-grandparents' lives in Prague in the late 1930s and early 1940s, just a couple of years before they were deported to their deaths. On the simplest level, the *pshat* if you will, they record a Jewish couple in their early sixties, living their life in Prague, communicating with their adult son. But they are also the last sign of life from people who were murdered just because they were Jewish. I can't imagine what it was like for him to receive these snippets of news from home, familiar handwriting, people, and places, but knowing it was out of reach. Not knowing when the next letter would come. And not knowing which was the last letter. How long did it take him, I wonder, from when he received the last letter, dated 24th May 1941, to realise that there would be no more.

But is this really the story told by the letters? It is the story that I read into them, based on my prior knowledge and experience of my Grandpa's life. It is tempting to read the heartbreak, the guilt, the loss into these letters. They document a family separation, that's for sure, and the sadness and difficulty that accompanies the circumstances of the parents who stayed behind in the old country while their son escaped the impending threat of doom. But none of them knew what was going to happen. My great-grandparents did not know that they were to be deported and killed just because they were Jewish. But I, the great-granddaughter born decades later, know that. I know that my paternal grandparents survived the Shoah. I know that my great-grandparents did not. My grandparents had always told me that there was nothing left from "before," no trace of our family that had lived in Europe since time immemorial. Thus, I read these letters through this lens. I cannot separate my knowledge of what happened afterwards with my experience of discovering and reading these letters. I can't read them without reading the memory of Amalek into them.

Like photographs, these letters capture what no longer exists. Philosopher Roland Barthes explains that "What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially."[4] Photographs record a moment, but the very existence of a photograph tells us that that moment has passed. There is something particularly haunting about Holocaust photographs. As literary critic Marianne Hirsch explains, the "Holocaust photograph is uniquely able to bring out this particular capacity of photographs to hover between life and death, to capture only that which no longer exists."[5] When we view photographs of people who were later murdered in the Shoah, we cannot help but view them through this lens. We already know "that they have all died,

[4] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 4.
[5] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 20.

that their world has been destroyed, and that our only access to it is through those pictures and through the stories they have left behind."[6] Letters from the Shoah function in a similar way. Unlike photographs, at least before selfies existed, letters are created by those who write them. Letters from the Shoah are authentic relics, composed by, written by, touched by people murdered in that horror.

For me, as a third-generation descendant of the Shoah, these letters take on enormous significance. I had never held or touched anything created by my great-grandparents. Before I discovered these letters, I knew my great-grandparents only as stern faces in the black-and-white photographs that decorated the walls of Grandpa's study. But these letters bring them to life in a way I have never experienced before. When I come to read the letters—they are mostly in German—I am struck by the banality of their content. My great-grandmother writes of the people she has had lunch with, who she has bumped into in the street. She wants to know how my Grandpa is doing and to hear from him as quickly as possible. She writes in great detail of my great-grandparents' move from one apartment to another in the same building. Yet I find these details, as pedestrian as they may seem, heartbreaking. These letters open a window into a world I have never know, they bring my great-grandparents to life. And at the same time, every word reminds me of their fate. That my great-grandmother, an insulin dependent diabetic, died in the Terezin ghetto in 1942, because there was no access to insulin in the ghetto. That my great-grandfather was transported to Auschwitz in December 1943, and no one has seen or heard from him since.

As we approach Purim, Jewish tradition holds us between devastation and celebration. On Shabbat Zachor we remember Amalek, the eternal enemy of the Jews. But then comes the celebrations of Purim, which demonstrate that

[6] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 20.

although tragedy is part of our history, and we need to remember that, we shouldn't let it define us. There is a Midrash, where the people of Israel ask Moshe Rabeinu: "there is one verse that says "remember what Amalek did to you," and another verse that says "remember the day of Shabbat and sanctify it." How can both these verses exist?"[7] In other words, how can the word זכור be used for both things? How can we be commanded to remember our darkest days and to remember our day of rest and celebration? Moshe Rabeinu responds: a cup of spiced wine is not comparable to a cup of vinegar. But they are both cups. They both hold part of our tradition. One use of זכור is to keep shabbat, the other use is to destroy and cut off all the seed of Amalek. Jewish tradition teaches us to remember the good and to remember the bad, to remember the suffering and remember the joy, to remember persecution and to remember escape. Remembering our past is a sacred act that links us to our ancestors and connects us to their experiences. We all experience the good and the bad in our own lives. There is sacredness in remembering both.

[7] Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 44:10

Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 44:10

אמרו לו ישראל, משה רבינו, כתוב אחד אומר זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק, וכתוב אחר אומר זכור את יום השבת לקדשו, היאך יתקיימו שניהם. אמר להם, לא דומה כוס של קונדיטון לכוס של חומץ. זה כוס וזה כוס. זה זכור לשמור ולקדש את יום השבת, וזה זכור להשמיד ולהכרית את כל זרעו של עמלק, שנ' והיה בהניח ה' וכו' לא תשכח.

The Israelites said to our teacher Moses: Moses ! One Scripture text says, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8); and it is written, "Remember what Amalek did unto thee" (Deut. 25:17). How can these two texts be fulfilled? He said to them: The cup of spiced wine is not to be compared to the cup of vinegar. This "Remember" is in order to observe and to sanctify the Sabbath day, and the other "Remember" is in order to destroy and to cut off all the seed of Amalek, as it is said, "Therefore it shall be, when the Lord thy God hath given thee rest from all thine enemies… thou shalt not forget" (Deut. 25:19). || Israel forgot to destroy and to cut off all the seed of Amalek, but the Holy One, blessed be He, did not forget.