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# **Remember the Past, But Don't Be Held Captive by It**



by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

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## ***We remember for the future and for life.***

Judaism is a religion of memory. The verb *zachor*, remember, appears no fewer than 169 times in the Hebrew Bible. “Remember that you were strangers in Egypt”; “Remember the days of old”; “Remember the seventh day to keep it holy”. Memory, for Jews, is a religious obligation. This is particularly so at this time of the year. We call it the “Three Weeks” leading up to the saddest day in the Jewish calendar, [Tisha B’Av](#), the anniversary of the destruction of the two Temples, the first by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon in 586 BCE, the second by Titus in 70 CE.

Jews never forgot those tragedies. To this day, at every wedding we break a glass in their memory. During the Three Weeks, we have no celebrations. On Tisha B'Av itself, we spend the day fasting and sitting on the floor or low stools like mourners, reading the Book of Lamentations. It is a day of profound collective grief.

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Two and a half thousand years is a long time to remember. Often I am asked – usually in connection with the Holocaust – is it really right to remember? Should there not be a limit on grief? Are not most of the ethnic conflicts in the world fueled by memories of perceived injustices long ago? Would not the world be more peaceable if once in a while we forgot?

My answer is both yes and no, for it depends on how we remember.

#History answers the question, “What happened?” Memory answers the question, “Who, then, am I?”

Though the two are often confused, memory is different from history. History is someone else’s story. It’s about events that occurred long ago to someone else. Memory is my story. It’s about where I come from and of what narrative I am a part.

History answers the question, “What happened?” Memory answers the question, “Who, then, am I?” It is about identity and the connection between the generations.

In the case of collective memory, it all depends on how we tell the story. We don't remember for the sake of revenge. "Do not hate the Egyptians," said Moses, "for you were strangers in their land." To be free, you have to let go of hate. Remember the past, says Moses, but do not be held captive by it. Turn it into a blessing, not a curse; a source of hope, not humiliation.

To this day, the Holocaust survivors I know spend their time sharing their memories with young people, not for the sake of revenge, but its opposite: to teach tolerance and the value of life. Mindful of the lessons of Genesis, we too try to remember for the future and for life.

In today's fast-moving culture, we undervalue acts of remembering. Computer memories have grown, while ours have become foreshortened. Our children no longer memorize chunks of poetry. Their knowledge of history is often all too vague. Our sense of space has expanded. Our sense of time has shrunk. That cannot be right.

One of the greatest gifts we can give to our children is the knowledge of where we have come from, the things for which we fought, and why.

#A society without memory is like a journey without a map. It's all too easy to get lost.

None of the things we value – freedom, human dignity, justice – were achieved without a struggle. None can be sustained without conscious vigilance. A society without memory is like a journey without a map. It's all too easy to get lost.

I, for one, cherish the richness of knowing that my life is a chapter in a book begun by my ancestors long ago, to which I will add my contribution before handing it on to my children. Life has meaning



when it is part of a story, and the larger the story, the more our imaginative horizons grow.

Besides, things remembered do not die. That's as close as we get to immortality on earth.

*An excerpt from an article first published by The Times (UK) in July 2004.*

[Click here](#) for more content by Rabbi Sacks related to *The Three Weeks*.

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## More About The Author

### Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l was an international religious leader, philosopher, and respected moral voice. The author of over 35 books, he received multiple awards in recognition of

his work including the 2016 Templeton Prize. He was the recipient of 18 honorary doctorates, and was knighted by Her Majesty The Queen in 2005 and made a Life Peer, taking his seat in the House of Lords in October 2009. Rabbi Sacks zt”l served as the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013.

Rabbi Sacks zt”l was born on the 8th March 1948 and passed away on the 7th November 2020 (Shabbat Kodesh 20th MarCheshvan 5781). These weekly teachings from Rabbi Sacks zt”l are part of the ‘Covenant & Conversation’ series on the weekly Torah reading. Read more essays from the series on [www.rabbisacks.org](http://www.rabbisacks.org). Also available: The FAMILY EDITION

of Covenant & Conversation, designed to enhance your parsha conversation with everyone from teenagers to great-great-grandparents. To read and print this family-friendly learning resource, for an inter-generational discussion around your Shabbat table on Rabbi Sacks' ideas for the week, [please click here.](#)

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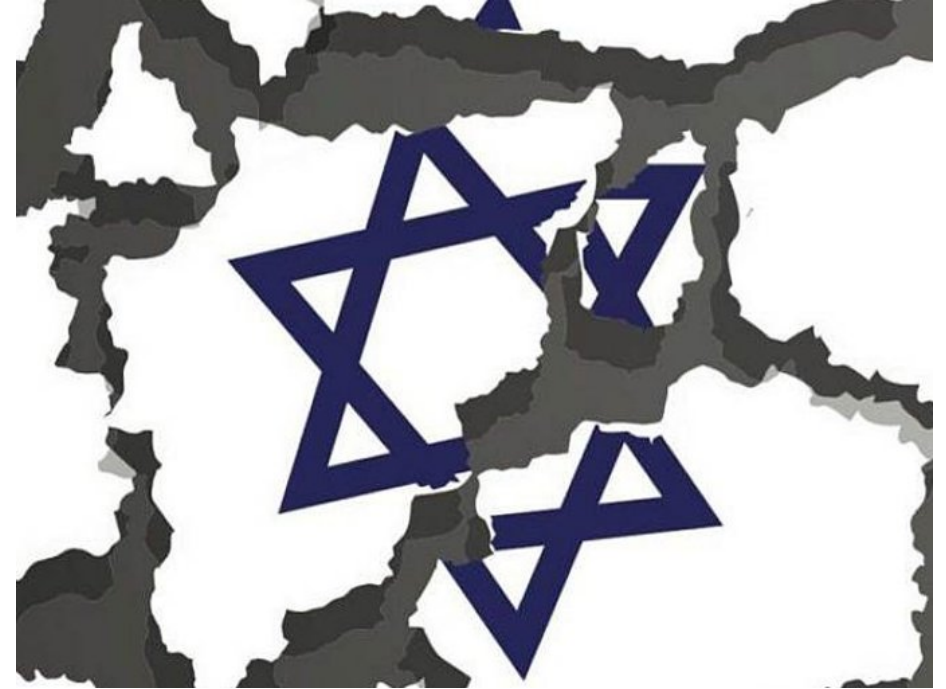


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