

## Sermon by Rabbi Paula Feldstein

### What we remember and what we forget - Ekev 2022

Some things you remember so clearly, and others you don't remember at all. About twenty-six years ago, when I was pregnant with Eve, my husband, Jordan, and I took a Lamaze class to get ready for her birth. The teacher was really wonderful and, as this was a very important event in our lives, we were paying attention to every word. One of the things she said that I still remember was that as quickly as possible after the baby was born, we should write down what we wanted to remember about that experience because we would forget it very quickly. I thought, "How do you forget giving birth to your child?"

She further explained: "Childbirth is not easy, and we forget much of what is difficult about that experience right afterwards. Otherwise, we would probably not have any more children." She was saying that we human beings are wired to forget some of the difficult moments in life, or maybe to remember them as being not as bad as they actually were. How much do I remember about the night that my precious daughter was born? Some. But she was right, I don't remember a lot of the bad. Especially the pain.

Why am I telling you all of this? Because our Torah portion, Ekev, talks a lot about remembering and forgetting.

The words remember — *zachor* — and don't forget — *al shachach* — appear over and over in this portion. This week we are reading from the Book of Deuteronomy. The Jewish people have spent their forty years in the desert, and they are about to enter the Promised Land. Moses, however, is not allowed to enter the land of Israel. The Book of Deuteronomy are

mostly his words – a very, *very* long sermon if you will. Before he dies, he is trying to instill in these people, who have not become known for their good behavior while wandering in the desert, to stay true to G-d and keep the commandments.

So, what are we supposed to remember and not forget? The usual things: don't worship idols, stay loyal to G-d, do the commandments that have been given in the last four books of the Torah. Moses expresses his concern, his anxiety, about what will happen with his people in the future, in the Promised Land. He tries to instill all of his wisdom in them before he dies at the end of this book, at the end of the Torah.

What is also fascinating about this book is it isn't just full of "remember this law" and "don't forget to worship only G-d" but it is also full of stories. Stories that we have already read earlier in the Torah but this time they are being retold by Moses. They are his memories of what happened earlier in the Torah. This is why we have the Ten Commandments twice; once in the Book of Exodus when the event happened, and once later in Deuteronomy when Moses is retelling the story of what happened back in Exodus.

In this week's portion, Moses retells the story of the golden calf. Much of it is similar to what we read in Exodus. While some of the order of events is different, some of the language is almost identical. When we look at the differences, we notice something interesting. The version that Moses tells later, in Deuteronomy, emphasizes certain aspects of the story. For example: Moses puts more emphasis on the role that he played in saving the people from G-d's anger. In the original story of the golden calf, G-d is ready to destroy the Jewish people and give Moses a new people to lead. However, Moses argues on their behalf and convinces G-d not to destroy

them. When he retells this part of the story in Deuteronomy, he emphasizes how much trouble they were in and how hard he had to work to save them.

Memory is fascinating. We all have family stories and stories of long-ago events in our lives that have been told over and over. We know that some of them have changed a little, and there are some family stories that we aren't even sure are *true* anymore. I'm sure we each have a story or two that we have told differently over the years, emphasizing certain parts over others. And as my Lamaze teacher reminded me all those years ago, we remember certain facts and events more than others.

It is human nature to forget the more painful aspects of a story over time. Sometimes we even romanticize the past, you know, "back in the good old days.... when everything was so much better than it is now."

We do this at Hebrew Tabernacle as well. We have a history, a past, and I love hearing the stories about people and events at Hebrew Tabernacle. It is important to remember our history as best we can and honor the parts that we are proud of. Hebrew Tabernacle has been a haven for German Jews, for Holocaust survivors. It has been a place where we remember that history and honor it. But, while remembering is important, we must admit that the past was not all as rosy as we remember it. Hebrew Tabernacle had its share of conflict and in-fighting; some people felt judged, others felt like outsiders. Like everything else in life, remembering must be balanced with accepting change and moving forward. The past is the past and we can never return to it. We can remember it, we can honor, it but every second we live it is further behind us. We can only live in the present and look to the future. The only thing we can rely on in life is that there is constant change.

Congregations are like living organisms: they change, they grow, they evolve and if they don't, they die. Our congregation is changing, growing, and evolving – and this is a very good thing. The challenge we have before us is to find the right balance between honoring and preserving our past and growing into who we will be in the future. I personally find the possibilities at Hebrew Tabernacle to be very exciting.

May the power of our good memories carry Hebrew Tabernacle forward to a bright and growing future. Amen.