

## "The Six Ideas Everyone Should Remember"

Do you know how I spend most of my evenings? Helping my daughters memorize things for tests, from physics to physical health, biology to geometry. Every night, it is study and find ways to help them memorize: Newton's laws, the 6 key nutrients, the distributive property, the symmetric property of congruence, parts of speech, Latin roots and, of course, the 26 Books of the New Testament!

I have nothing against memorization. I did it year after year in high school, then Yeshiva University and then Seminary. Part of education is memorization.

We Jews have a soft spot when it comes to remembering. The word "Zachor", to remember, is a key part of our tradition. What you might not know is that remembering is actually a "mitzvah( a commandment)". There are six commandments one fulfills each day just by remembering something. Six things that the Torah commands us to remember every day. All you have to do is memorize these six events and you have fulfilled six of the 613 commandments. Easy!

So this morning, I am going to close the biology book and put away geometry, because I want you to memorize six things. These six are not only mitzvot that you will fulfill just by listening to me, but are the keys to life in general. Memorize these six and I guarantee you, you life will benefit as a result.

If you open a complete traditional prayer book, you will find at the end of the morning service six sentences that the rabbis want us to meditate on as we begin the day . I bet you know one, maybe two, but

there are the six. Together, they offer some great tools to living a beautiful and more meaningful life. Let me share them with you.

The first thing you must remember is found in Deuteronomy (16:3). It says:

*"Remember the Exodus from the land of Egypt all the days of your life."*

This is "remembrance" number one. In religion, this is what is known as the "divine history" moment, the event that reminds us forever that G-d is in history, in our lives and that he love us. "Divine History". Every religion has such a moment . For Christians, "divine history" is the Crucifixion; for us, it is the Exodus from Egypt. When we recall the Exodus, we are declaring that G-d so loved us that He took us out of Egyptian bondage and brought us to Mt. Sinai to reveal his word to humanity.Exodus is our people's reminder that G-d loves us, care for us.

You know what it means to be a "religious" person is? He is not defined by how many commandments he performs or how often he or she goes to services. A religious person is "one who sees and feels the shaping and guiding hand of G-d in all things"( the words of Rabbi David Wolpe). A religious person has an awareness of G-d seeping into all activities of his life. That is a religious person.

And that is what remembering the events of Egypt all is about. It is telling us to remember that G-d is "personal", He is involved in our lives, and we should open our hearts to that experience.

You see, to say you "believe in a G-d" is not all that important. When I hear people tell me they believe in G-d, in a Creator, I say what

does that *mean* in your life? So what? How does that belief impact your life?

But if you say G-d took us out of Egypt, what you are saying is that G-d plays an *active* role in this world. You are saying He actually cares about us, His creatures, and He loves us.

And let me tell you, knowing that offers a pathway to a richer life. If you can learn to see G-d in your life, to know that what happens to you matters to Him, is the most meaningful and positive statement one can make. "*The existence of G-d is not the issue, the difference G-d can make in our lives is.*" (A quote from Rabbi Harold Kushner).

To remember Egypt means to remember that G-d loves us, cares for us and is with us. And when the waves are crashing against your life, when the shore is eroding, the winds are picking up, and the flood waters are rising on our existence, there is nothing more comforting than knowing that you are not alone, that there is a G-d who loves you. That is what the Exodus reminds us of, a G-d who cares. Remembering that gets you through the moments of the day, and leads to a richer life.

What else must we remember? We are also commanded in the Torah:

*"Remember what the Amalekites did to you on the way, as you were leaving Egypt. How they attacked the weakest at your rear. Do not forget, erase their memory."* (Deuteronomy 25:17)

There is no better recipe for leading a meaningful life than knowing you are doing something to make a difference in this world. Nothing better.

The Amalekites were worse than the Egyptians, the Canaanites and the Philistines. They were pure evil, showing no mercy, spreading hate and cruelty throughout the wilderness. And we are to dedicate our lives to fight that evil! Remember the Amalekites, what they did to others and to our people and vow to never allow that to happen again. It is our mission to make this world different.

I'm sorry, my dear congregants. Some rabbis quote the great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, others quote Rabbi Solomon Schechter, and others, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. I quote Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Bob Kane, and Stan Lee. They are all Jews and all creators of Superman, Batman and Spiderman. Each of their superhero characters are so enduring and so inspiring for children because they each have vowed to never forget a tragic incident in their lives. Everyone of them take an oath to do something meaningful with their lives. His planet is destroyed and so Superman dedicates his life to protecting his new adoptive planet; he witnesses his parents brutally murdered and so Bruce Wayne dedicates his life to fighting criminal; failing to prevent a crook from murdering his Uncle Ben, Peter Parker wages a never ending crusade to fight evil. Stan Lee and a host of Jewish writers have all said they got their ideas from their Jewish heritage, from the idea of Zachor, never forgetting and always confronting evil.

We learn from the pain inflicted on us that evil is not to be tolerated, and cruelty has to be confronted. That is what gives life meaning. You want the path to a meaningful life? Then remember each day that you are not here on earth just to eat, sleep and reproduce, but to do good and fight evil. You are here to make your life count. There is something amazingly powerful knowing you have a role to play in this

world and that is to fight injustice and work for the betterment of society. And you must remember that everyday.

To live a life of meaning, one must also:

*"Remember that you stood at Mt. Sinai and received the Law".*

I have always wondered why so many people love hearing so called "fire and brimstone" sermons. You drive down along the Boulevard, past Temple Israel and just past the bridge, you will see a church with a sign that invites you to "*Come and Feel the Fire!*". That is a "charismatic" church, where you are scolded as sinners and made to feel the "Wrath of G-d" for backsliding. I've always wondered: Why would people want to come to church to be yelled at?

I think I now understand. Being scolded as sinners remind you that G-d has great expectations of you. He has set the highest standards for you. It may not be great to be disciplined, but it is a whole lot better than living a life where what you do doesn't matter. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote that human beings have a "need to be good". Indeed. We have an innate desire to know that G-d takes us seriously, that we are accountable. The story of Mt. Sinai, of us receiving the Torah, is a reminder, a wake up call that G-d has expectations of us. He expects us to be capable of doing tremendous things with our lives.

The older I get, the more I appreciate that message of Judaism. It tells us that far from being sinners, incapable of rising above our flawed natures, we are made in the image of G-d. G-d gave us His law because He has confidence in us and believes in us.

You want to live a meaningful life? Remember Mt. Sinai and G-d's expectations of us. Christianity teaches that the Law was given to show

us how impossible it is to live by His law and how, only by grace, can we gain salvation. That is *one* way to look at it.

However, our understanding is that G-d *believes* in us. He gave us the Torah because we are His greatest creation. We are "a little more than animal, a little less than angels". He thinks we are capable to suppressing our animalistic tendencies, our selfish qualities, our anger and hate and actually live as humans created in His Divine Image. I don't know about you, but that is an empowering message. That gives life meaning.

So, remember G-d loves you, remember that you have a role to play in this world to fight evil, and remember that G-d gave us His Torah because He believes in us.

And while you are at it, don't forget the fourth remembrance:

*"Remember how you angered G-d in the wilderness by worshipping a golden calf."*

The Golden Calf scene is one of the most dismal episodes in Jewish history. The incident caused Israel to fall from the lofty and spiritual pedestal it had ascended upon receiving the Ten Commandments. It caused Moses to shatter the Tablets of the Law. It is one of the saddest moments in Biblical history. We failed G-d and we failed ourselves.

You know why you need to remember that every day? It is a reminder that we all fall short of our mission, that we all make mistakes, and yet G-d is long suffering and loves us even when we fall short.

Life is filled with more failures than successes. And before you start feeling sorry for yourself, before you develop an attitude of worthlessness, remember that G-d saw the sin of the Golden Calf and still saw fit to forgive His people. This reminds us that G-d never gives up on us.

It is so sad we live in a world of clichés. So we hear all the time about the vengeful G-d of the "Old Testament". Nothing could be further from the truth. The message of the Torah is that G-d is full of mercy. He doesn't kick us when we are down, He doesn't inflict injury. He is there when we are down and helps dust us off.

When you remember the Golden Calf, you remember that there is no low to which we cannot lower ourselves, but there is also nothing we cannot rise above. Remember the Golden Calf and remember that G-d gives us second chances. You can always start again.

The fifth remembrance seems odd at first, but if you are looking for a life of meaning and depth, it is critical. We are commanded in the Torah:

*"Remember that which the L-rd your G-d did to Miriam on the way."*

This one needs some explaining.

Miriam, the sister of Moses did something pretty bad to her brother. She spoke ill of him; she slandered him. We are not privy to what she said, but it had something to do with his family life. And apparently, it was true. She spread this gossip among the camp. And Miriam was punished with "tzaraat", a disease similar to leprosy by G-d.

Now you know what you are supposed to remember.

But why? Remember G-d punishing Miriam for what she said about Moses?

Absolutely! For it reminds us that we are all in this world together. We must never tear each other apart, tear the fragile world of interconnections between us. Miriam one day, as good as she was (and the Torah speaks so highly of her), dismantled her brother in front of others. She spoke ill of him. Why?

I suspect it is for the same reason we all do it. It is for some reason human nature to build ourselves up at the expense of others, to speak ill of our neighbor, to fault and criticize others.

You want a more meaningful life this year? You want to give your life a sense of purpose? Guard your tongue. Don't build yourself up at the expense of others. Don't ever hurt your fellow human being by demeaning him or ruining him. Give life meaning by holding the most powerful weapon you have, your tongue and make it an instrument of peace.

And speaking of peace, let me end by asking you to remember this last "mitzvah", the one "remembrance" you probably knew before I began today:

"Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy".

Everyone knows the reason for this one. It is to offer enduring testimony that G-d created the world. However, few translate what the Sabbath really does and that is to give meaning and purpose. It teaches us that there is more to life than work.



The great Hebrew writer, Ahad Ha'am, said "more than the Jew has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jew". I have never forgotten that phrase and every Shabbat, I am reminded of the wisdom of those words.

The Shabbat makes me human not a drone, free not enslaved to career; it is a celebration of life, a reminder that life is to be enjoyed, that the fast paced nature of needing to do this and participate in that, attend this and accomplish that, is not what we are all about. We are created by G-d to enjoy life, to rest, and to be at peace.

If you want to give life meaning, remember the Sabbath; remember the gifts G-d has given us and learn to enjoy them, each day.

When the holidays are over, it is back to memorization of chemical equations, French verbs, Latin roots, and square roots. But hopefully, I can also take time each day to help my family remember the six things our rabbis wanted us to always have in mind.

I don't know what field my daughters will enter, but regardless, there will be many more years of memorization for them ahead. I do hope, however, that they will remember the six things the rabbis want us to keep close to our hearts as well: 1) "Remember that G-d loves us (as the Exodus teaches), 2) that we have a mission and role to play to fight evil, never forgetting Amalek, 3) that the Mt. Sinai experience shows G-d believes in us. 4) that we, like the Jews who worshipped the Golden Calf, make mistakes but our worth is infinite in the eyes of G-d, 5) that we must guard our tongue and not speak ill of others (Miriam) and, 6) that the Sabbath is a reminder of what makes us truly human, the pursuit of inner peace.

If we can remember these this year, we will fill all of our days, not just with "mitzvot", but with meaning!

Amen