

Parashat Ki Tavo

Question: How long does it take to understand what has happened to us?

Torah Text: Deuteronomy 29:1–3

Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: You have seen all that the Eternal did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his courtiers and to his whole country: the wondrous feats that you saw with your own eyes, those prodigious signs and marvels.

וְלֹא-נָתַן יְהוָה לָכֶם לֵב לְדַעַת וְעֵינַיִם לִרְאוֹת וְאָזְנוֹת לִשְׁמָע עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה:

Yet to this day the Eternal has not given you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear.

Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 5b

[c. 500 CE, Babylonia]

Yet even Moses our teacher, who said this to the Jewish people, did not allude to the Jewish people until after forty years that they should have stated this request, as it is stated: “And I have led you forty years in the wilderness” (Deuteronomy 29:4), which shows that Moses was speaking forty years after the revelation at Sinai. And at that point it is written: “But the Lord has not given you a heart to know, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, until this day” (Deuteronomy 29:3). Rabba said: Conclude from here that a person does not understand the opinion of his teacher until after forty years, as Moses said this to the Jewish people only after forty years of learning Torah.

RaShI

[1040–1105, France]

“Yet the LORD has not given you a heart to know” means to understand the loving-kindnesses of the Omnipresent and to cleave unto Him.

“Until this day.” I have heard that on the day when Moses gave the Book of the Law to the sons of Levi, as it is written, “And he gave it to the priests the sons of Levi,” all Israel came before Moses and said to him: “Teacher Moses, we, too, stood at Sinai and accepted the Torah, and it was given to us; why, then, do you give the people of your tribe control over it, that they may tomorrow say to us, ‘Not to you was it given, but to us was it given?’” Moses rejoiced at this matter and in reference to this he said to them, “This day have you become the people,” meaning, “Only this day have I come to understand that you are attached to and have a desire for the Omnipresent.”

Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*

[Contemporary, United States]

There is perhaps no verse in the Torah more disturbing to the feminist than Moses’ warning to his people in Exodus 19:15, “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman.” For here, at the very moment that the Jewish people stand at Mount Sinai ready to enter into the covenant, not now the covenant with the individual patriarchs

but presumably with the people as a whole, Moses addresses the community only as men.

The specific issue is ritual impurity: an emission of semen renders both a man and his female partner temporarily unfit to approach the sacred. But Moses does not say, “Men and women do not go near each other.” At the central moment of Jewish history, women are invisible. It was not their experience that interested the chronicler or that informed and shaped the text.

We cannot redefine Judaism in the present without redefining our past because our present grows out of history. The Jewish need to reconstruct the past in light of the present converges with the feminist need to recover women’s history within Judaism. Knowing that women are active members of the Jewish community in the present, we know that we were always part of the community, not simply as objects of male purposes but as subjects and shapers of tradition.

To accept androcentric histories as the whole of Jewish history is to enter into a secret collusion with those who would exclude us from full membership in the Jewish community. It is to accept the idea that men were the only significant agents in Jewish history when we would never accept this account of contemporary Jewish life. The Jewish community today is a community of women and men, and it has never been otherwise. It is time, therefore, to recover our history as the history of women and men, a task that will both restore our own history to women and provide a fuller Jewish history for the Jewish community as a whole.

Elizabeth Loftus and Hunter Hoffman, “Misinformation and Memory: The Creation of New Memories”

[Contemporary, United States]

Misleading information presented after an event can lead people to erroneous reports of that misinformation. Different process histories can be responsible for the same erroneous report in different people.

We argue that the relative proportion of times that the different process histories are responsible for erroneous reporting will depend on the conditions of acquisition, retention, and retrieval of information. Given the conditions typical of most misinformation experiments, it appears that misinformation acceptance plays a major role, memory impairment plays some role, and pure guessing plays little or no role. Moreover, we argue that misinformation acceptance has not received the appreciation that it deserves as a phenomenon worthy of our sustained investigation. It may not tell us anything about impairment of memories, but it does tell us something about the creation of new memories.

Elizabeth Loftus, “Planting Misinformation in the Human Mind: A 30-Year Investigation of the Malleability of Memory”

[Contemporary, United States]

The misinformation effect refers to the impairment in memory for the past that arises after exposure to misleading information. The phenomenon has been investigated for at

least 30 years, as investigators have addressed a number of issues. These include the conditions under which people are especially susceptible to the negative impact of misinformation, and conversely when are they resistant. Warnings about the potential for misinformation sometimes work to inhibit its damaging effects, but only under limited circumstances.

The misinformation effect has been observed in a variety of human and nonhuman species. And some groups of individuals are more susceptible than others. At a more theoretical level, investigators have explored the fate of the original memory traces after exposure to misinformation appears to have made them inaccessible. This review of the field ends with a brief discussion of the newer work involving misinformation that has explored the processes by which people come to believe falsely that they experienced rich complex events that never, in fact, occurred.

Rebecca Solnit, *Recollections of My Nonexistence*

[Contemporary, United States]

There was so much we couldn't talk about then, and still some aspects and consequences we haven't yet talked about enough. But greater understanding emerges now as we look backward from a world that has acquired language for experiences that were far more difficult to name when they occurred. What changes with time isn't necessarily the event itself or even the memory of it. What changes can be the vocabulary, categories, and social understanding available to the person remembering.

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

[1933–2004, United States]

All memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating. Communities select images and narratives that become representative of an event. What survives isn't simply what happened but what a culture has chosen to preserve, repeat, teach, photograph, commemorate, and name.

Joan Didion, “The White Album”

[1934–2021, United States]

We tell ourselves stories in order to live. We have an impulse to arrange disconnected experience into coherent narrative. We impose beginnings and endings, identify causes, assign significance, and choose among competing interpretations of what we have seen. Retrospection gives us the ability to construct a plot from experiences that didn't necessarily feel like a plot while they were occurring.

Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*

[Contemporary, United States]

Memory becomes our personal, live-in, self-justifying historian. Our memories don't simply preserve a neutral record of our behavior. As our understanding of ourselves changes, recollection can change with it. Memories that threaten our sense of who we are can fade or be interpreted differently, while memories consistent with our current beliefs become easier to retrieve and more convincing.

The result is a peculiar problem for hindsight: the person looking backward possesses more information than the person who originally experienced the event, but the person looking backward may also possess a memory that has been altered by everything that happened afterward.