

Memory on Trial: Kaplan's Two Torahs

By Dr. Jeffrey Schein

Introduction

For Mordecai Kaplan Torah always has two distinct (though often overlapping) meanings. Torah is Jewish traditions, texts, and the lived experiences of the Jewish People. It is also חכמה, all the wisdom that comes from the humanities, natural and behavioral sciences and non-Jewish religious traditions.

I have tried to employ both in this opinion piece

-Dr. Jeffrey Schein, Executive Director, The Mordecai Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood

Reflections

Not remembering is no mere failure to retrieve relevant information. Speaking personally, those moments of “forgetfulness” are accompanied by deep and conflicting emotions: anger, regret, and self-reproach just to name a few. Beneath it all I also hear the plaintive prayer of the high holidays begging God not to abandon me in old age, at the time when my powers are waning.

We live in a Western civilization shaped in no small measure by Descartes's assertion cogito ergo sum, I think therefore I am. If I can't “think” I don't exist in a meaningful way

This bold assertion of Descartes in the 17th century misses the complexity of cognition as understood in 21st-century neuroscience (a topic that I claim no expertise in but enjoy and read about) ... It also misses Judaism's fundamental contention that the soul rather than our mind is the final measure of our worth.

This all came into rather dramatic relief this past week with the report on Joe Biden's testimony about the documents found in his home and the assertion by the special prosecutor Hurr that he was a gentle old man with memory shortcomings. David Brooks in response to these developments made the following comment on the PBS Newshour

Yes, he loses facts but he still shows consistently good judgment.

To create some *midrash on* the difference between factual memory and competent judgements let us call a star witness, Dr. Elkhanon Goldberg. Dr. Goldberg has *yihus*(*privileged background*). He traces his roots in neuroscience to his days training in the Soviet Union with Alexander Luria, the grandfather of neuroscience. Most relevant to our Joe Biden discussion is his 2009 work *The Wisdom Paradox*.

Goldberg puzzles over how our minds grow in complex ways, perhaps channeling Joni Mitchell's Clouds "Something is gained and something lost in living every day." With the blessing of relatively good cognitive health, our minds grow simultaneously more fragile and resilient as we age.

Goldberg rejects cultural mimes of the 1980's and 1990's that the right brain is intuitive and our left brain analytical, Goldberg suggests something different based on his own and other neuroscientists' research in the first decade of the 21st century. It is a point of view not unchallenged in the last fifteen years but still considered a masterful paradigm shift.

Our right brain is the site of new, novel learning and our left brain the site for patterns based on older learning.

No surprise then that we often remember things from our distant past better than more newly acquired knowledge. Anatomical studies confirm that this right side of the brain decays more quickly as we age. Relatively speaking our left side remains stable and even evidences new growth.

For Goldberg, this left side is where wisdom lives and matures. Our gifts for executive control (remember Brooks characterized Biden as a competent administrator) and seeing patterns of human experience continue to grow. This is where “wisdom” allows us to keep functioning well.

Let us now call one other “star witness” to the stand. Judah Ben Tema , a Rabbi whose wisdom is found in a volume called Pirke Avot, foundational wisdom of Jewish tradition. In characterizing the human life cycle, Judah Ben Tema begins with some predictable markers, ones heavily influenced by Judaism’s fondness for studying sacred texts yet but also reflects the more mundane, practical elements of a huma life

At five we study Bible

At ten Mishnah

Thirteen is the time for Mitzvot (as in becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah)

At fifteen we move on to Talmud

At eighteen we marry

At twenty we seek a profession

At thirty we have full powers

At forty true understanding

At fifty the capacity to offer advice

At sixty we are elders.

At seventy we are graying

Now the hafta-ah gedolah, the big surprise of this portrait. At 80 we experience g'vurah, a rebirth of heroic capacity. Perhaps we even learn to think better qualitatively.

Eventually, according to Ben Tema, we sputter (at 90) and end our time on this earth (100). Surely there are memory lapses galore for most of us during this last decade or so.

But to make 80 the marker for decline clearly neither reflects Elkhanon Goldberg or Judah Ben Tema points of view who give us more optimistic markers.

A VERY PERSONAL AND POLITICAL EPILOGUE

Finally time for a full confession. Anger and disdain for someone who shows a different slice of contemporary neuroscience belie any apparent objectivity of this article. Goldberg was certainly aware of the research about aging that is game-changing about a different point in the life-cycle: adolescence. Brain development unfolds much more slowly than previously thought. Robust autonomy and executive control occurs not in the teen years but with the gradual growth of the neocortex, a process extending well into our twenties. We now have new reasons based on neuroscience to forgive our young their indiscretions.

Naturally, the unfolding of any pattern of human development is unique in any individual. This is true not only of Joe Biden but also of Donald Trump. Perhaps I can only feign objectivity here by referring to such a contemporary political figure only as the "one who cannot be named". I would rather have a team of "memory helpers" guiding a "wise but frail" mind than a President who violates so many basic attributes of derekh

eret, common sense and courtesy through lack of a well-developed neocortex.

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