

# Memory on Trial: Kaplan's Two Torahs

By Dr. Jeffrey Schein

## Introduction

*Mordecai Kaplan 's 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. Also, these thoughts reflect Dr. Schein's thinking and not the Kaplan Center Board or the Kaplan Center organization.*

-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' 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 I enjoy reading about but claim no expertise.) 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 Hur that he was a gentle older 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 *yichus* (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 song "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 the 1980s and 1990s cultural memes, asserting that the right brain is intuitive and our left brain analytical. He 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 that has yet to be

challenged in the last fifteen years but is 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*, the 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 but which also reflect the more mundane, practical elements of human 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 Temah, 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 two;

But to make 80 the marker for decline reflects the views of neither Elkhanon Goldberg nor Judah Ben Tema, whose points of view 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 in this article. Goldberg was certainly aware of the research about aging that is game-changing at a different point in the life cycle -adolescence. Brain development unfolds much more slowly than previously thought. Robust autonomy and executive control occur 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 feign objectivity here by referring to such a contemporary political figure 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 eretz*, common sense and courtesy.